



Harvest December series

BOUNDARIES IN JANUARY

— [Winter] —

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Prologue

Everything changes, no matter how much you wish otherwise.

All that is will disappear. From nothing comes something. Some things change for the better, others for the worse.

"Sniff..."

A child stood alone in the mountains crying.

The branches of the surrounding trees sagged from the weight of the snow piled, occasionally dropping small clumps to the ground.

The child kept crying.

His tears fell softly at his feet, like quiet rain.

"Toto-sama."

He took a step forward. The snow around him disappeared, leaving the ground bare.

He wiped his cheek with the sleeve of his kimono, but no matter how many times he did so, fresh tears wet his face.

"Kaka-sama."

He began to walk slowly, taking small steps, the sound of his feet breaking the silence of the forest.

He could hear the faint howls of wolves far away. They were looking for food, which was scarce in the winter mountains.

"Nene-sama, Madoi's here."

He didn't remember when the tears started. It was such a long time ago.

Each time he took a step, the snow around his feet would disappear, making a trail of round, dark patches on the land as if a small string of meteors had fallen behind him.

There was snow. Changing its existence caused it to dissolve.

What 'is' became what 'was'.

Then, empty space would be filled with substance.

That was the power he had, being the offspring of a god.

Madoi did not know when he had received these powers.

There was Toto-sama, Kaka-sama, and Nene-sama before, but now, he was the only one left.

A lonely child in the mountains.

He had been alone for a hundred years.

"Sniff.... sniff..."

He headed down the sloping path.

It was not much of a path - on a rare occasion, a hunter would make his way deep into the mountains, but most of the tracks Madoi walked on were made by wild animals.

Madoi followed them, knowing they would take him where he wanted to go.

It came instinctively to him, being the child god of these lands.

"I don't want to be alone." He sobbed.

He stopped, arriving at his destination.

He had reached an area with a flat surface, unlike the slopes he had been walking on so far.

Finally, his tears began to dry.

The last tear rolled down his chin and dropped by his feet.

He was standing on a square platform built of stone.

He knew he had to keep moving forward.

With a determined breath, he took a step.

"Toto-sama, this year, I will keep my promise!"

Most of his blood relations were long gone, but he still had his duties as a child god.

He took another step forward, and then another.

Between the large slabs of stone there were small pebbles, smooth and round like marbles.

They had a life of their own, like spirits bound to the land.

They were sacred.

They were a part of the Yaorozu.

The idea of Yaorozu was that where there was life and where there was nature, there was a god in every single form on earth.

The stones on the ground were no exception, and therefore, they contained power.

However, Madoi did not understand these things, being a child.

With each step he took, the pebbles rattled.

Clashing together to mimic the sound of crystalline bells.

They were the instruments of gods.

The stones lay close, but loose.

Lying in their natural state, they moved and shifted under his weight.

Every movement he made traveled through the slabs to the pebbles, causing a tremor through the land.

They would shake and collide with each other.

Ringling out, shimmering, tinkling.

"Kaka-sama, by Sakashima's name, I will make it this year."

The entire platform was vibrating now.

The sound of bells rang out continuously.

The snow did nothing to absorb the sound.

A long string of pebbles stretched out before him.

A human might have thought it looked like the white line on a running track, But it marked a boundary.

It was a line that divided the land of Sakashima and the land of Tagami.

A Toichigami only had his full power when he stood on the ground he ruled.

It was taboo to enter another god's territory. Should he trespass, he could easily become food to feed the wolves, hungry and waiting on the other side.

That was the rule amongst the gods, however...

"I"

Madoi took one step over the border.

The entire ground shook, and the sound of a million bells burst from the ground.

"Turn back. You do not belong here." A voice rang out.

Madoi almost froze in fear.

Madoi remembered what his father taught him.

"Madoi, the sound of bells are often used in rituals for purification, but when there are intruders, they act as a warning too."

Everything had turned.

Madoi shut his eyes tight.

He knew that, at any moment, he could have his throat ripped out by the wolves that served the god of Tagami.

A Tochigami out of his land was next to powerless against the reigning god.

"Even so."

Madoi covered his ears and ran.

He ran further and further away from the border. The bells still ringing behind his back, reminding him he had done something

wrong.

He was afraid, but he ran.

He had a promise to keep. A promise long due for a hundred years.

The sound of the bells diminished as he ran down the mountain at full speed, each step bringing him more relief.

Instead, from the bottom of the mountain, he began to hear faint music of traditional flute and drums.

He knew it was what humans called a 'recording'.

He had to leave the mountain as soon as possible. If he stayed any longer, those starving beasts with sharp yellow teeth were sure to come and get him.

Faster, faster!

He felt the tears welling up again as he ran.

Now, each step he took did not dissolve the snow entirely.

His powers were weak here.

He could start to hear the music more clearly now.

Down below, there was a shrine where people were paying their respects and celebrating the New Year.

They prayed and made new resolutions, hopeful they would come true. After all, even if everything turned out otherwise, what harm was there in making a wish?

God at the shrine

"Bells..." I muttered.

"...Bells?"

I was speaking to myself, I realized.

Still, I was pretty sure I heard something.

"What's the matter, Touyama?" Masaki Konno, the boy walking next to myself, Mizuho Touyama, asked pleasantly.

He was smiling, but his eyes were probing, obviously interested to know what I had noticed. He wasn't the type that made a conversation for the sake of it.

"Ringing..."

"You thought you heard the ringing of bells?" Masaki-san re-phrased for me.

It was easy to speak to this senior of mine, because he understood what I wanted to say even if I didn't speak in full sentences.

"You didn't hear anything, did you?" I asked.

As I suspected, his answer was no.

"Maybe it was from the bells on the hamayas," he suggested.

Walking a few steps before us was a family with the father holding a hamaya over his shoulder.

It was the last day of sanganichi for the new year, but Sakashima shrine was still crowded.

This shrine sat on the border of Sakashima and Tagami town.

Since there weren't many large shrines in the countryside, many people came from afar to pay their respects.

"But then again," he continued, "you wouldn't have thought it strange if it came from a hamaya."

".....Yeah." I sighed.

Masaki-san was observant, but sometimes I found his habit of deduction unnerving.

"Let's keep moving." He said as he ushered me forward.

Stopping in the middle of the crowd was a bad idea, because we were being in the way of all the other people making their way to the Saisenbako.

"Hmmm..." But I didn't move, and continued standing still to think.

"Touyama, you're too much of a single-tasker." He pulled at my hand so I would walk.

He looked back over his shoulder to study me as he pulled me forward.

"And you're too much of a multi-tasker when it comes to women." I shot back.

"Ouch." He laughed awkwardly at my comeback.

I felt pretty good about myself for that.

We followed the crowd that led us towards the main building of the shrine.

"It's been a while since I've walked through a crowd like this," Masaki said.

"Is that the city-boy in you talking?" I teased. "Are you trying to imply we're too underpopulated around here to suit your liking?"

"You wouldn't say that if you've experienced the morning rush, Touyama."

"I'm sure it was easy for you to perv on girls though, getting real close and stuff."

"No!! Never!!" His reaction was instantaneous.

It was fun the way he went bright pink so easily.

"You drive me crazy sometimes." he grumbled.

"Was there ever a time when you weren't?" I asked jokingly.

Silence.

"W-will you stop sobbing like a girl all of a sudden?" I said, hoping to calm him down.

"I just... I just want some peace in my life!" he blubbered.

"Guys like you tend to get wound up in trouble the more you try to avoid it. Murphy's law," I shrugged.

"I'll prove to you bad laws are made to be broken." he declared through tears.

"What are you talking about? You've already got yourself into relationship problems more dramatic than a skanky soap opera."

Whoops. Looks like I hit a nerve. He started to bawl.

"I think I'll stop here," I said. "Wouldn't want your wife in the hospital to murder me the moment she gets out."

"She's not my wife!" he snapped.

"You mentioned she was getting discharged tomorrow?" I asked.

"...Yeah." he nodded.

"Ah-hah, I can see you're relieved I changed the subject," I said
"And you've grown smart enough to go along with it."

"She'll be going in and out for checkups for a while," he said, "but as long as she regains her strength she should be alright."

"Yeah, Yuki has to take care of her body real well..." I said.

"She is the sole heir to the Towada empire after all." he said.

"...Because you never know when she's going to be a new mother. Because of you." I teased.

"Mizuho-sama, will you stop trying to steer every conversation in that direction!?" Masaki groaned

"I hope we all get together soon." I ignored him and changed the subject entirely.

Yuki Towada was currently hospitalized because of the events that occurred during our New Year party we had in Mt.Ookami just a few days ago.

The Towada's are a powerful family that dominated Tagami business in every area. Some members were involved in politics as well.

They were of old blood, but it wasn't just tradition that kept them strong.

Yuki was the only daughter of the main family, and she was expected to take over the empire in the next few years.

"She kept saying she wanted to come today for hatsumode too." Masaki-san laughed.

Yuki had fallen head over heels for this boy, asking him out immediately after they met.

Not only that, she was now adamant on marrying him and having his child.

"I don't get it." I muttered.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

I didn't explain what I meant, although it must have sounded out of the blue.

Yes, he was good looking, but not in a striking way that girls would swoon at his feet.

He was fun to tease (mostly when it came to sexual topics), and was clever enough to hold an interesting conversation, but still not so outstanding that he would grab any girl's attention.

The more I thought about it, the more I didn't understand the attraction that Yuki felt.

"Love, huh?" I murmured.

"Lover?" Masaki asked.

"That's not what I said!"

Later, as we wandered past the food stalls and the crowd began to thin, the mood lightened.

"Well, aren't we a funny pair to be out together, just you and me."

"I didn't think Kouhei would refuse to come." Masaki-san widened his eyes in disbelief.

"I did ask Onii-chan! But he..."

"...Morino, right?"

"That's a bad habit of yours, interrupting my speech." I scowled.

"Because I don't need to hear the rest of it. He's probably gone to help Morino at Sanae's, right?"

"...Right." I admitted.

At first, we were all going to get together today and do everything again when Yuki got discharged.

But then this morning, Onii-chan suddenly announced that Sanae's was busy and he was going to help.

"So only we remain." I sighed.

"Well, it's still better than nobody showing up at all."

"Just because we're going to go again tomorrow doesn't mean it's okay to break a promise!" I snapped.

"I'm sure Kouhei intended to keep his promise, but it's Sanae after all."

"I bet they aren't making any progress in their relationship." I mumbled.

We both sighed in unison.

"They're too close to notice." he said.

"No, Onii-chan's the only one too dumb to notice. Not Sanae." I remarked.

Smoke from the nearby Yakitori stall wafted by, making me hungry.

"Morino needs a chance." he said.

"A chance?" I asked.

"Something that will help her make a move." He explained.

"Like?" I pressed.

"How would I know?"

"You're being irresponsible saying whatever."

"They've always said the road to true love is a bumpy ride."

"Road to true love? Are you serious?"

"Just trying to be corny." He laughed at himself.

It was corny, but fitting for Sanae, seeing she had many obstacles to overcome.

We walked in silence for a while.

Too close to notice. I thought about those words.

How about me and Masaki-san?

We weren't far apart, but we weren't that close either.

Why wasn't I attracted at all?

There was a certain distance between us.

"Your hand."

"Hmm?"

"You can let go now." I told him.

"Oh yeah, the crowd isn't that bad anymore."

He nodded and let go.

Just like that.

Not that it mattered to me at all.

Masaki-san was fine holding hands with a friend like me, But the moment Yuki tried to hold his hand he would begin to squirm and make every excuse possible to escape.

He was alright holding hands with me, but not his girlfriend?

I wondered why.

"I don't get it." I mumbled.

Masaki Konno was weird.

"Why today?" he asked out of the blue.

"What do you mean?" I asked, caught off guard by the question.

"We're going to get together when Yuki gets discharged anyway, so why did we have to come today?"

"Today's the last day." I said.

"For what?"

"I'm glad you asked!" I stuffed my hand into my coat and pulled out a large piece of paper. I was secretly relieved that I got a chance to present it.

I held it up before him like a treasure map, and he examined it carefully.

"Is that a hand-written map of the locations of the food stalls?"

"YEAH!!"

It took three days to complete from the very beginning when they started to build the stalls.

Now I had the perfect food map of Sakashima shrine.

"I've been secretly studying every single food stall we've walked past, making sure to take note which ones look the most promising."

"You could have just bought whatever caught your eye as we walked. It's not going to be easy walking back..."

"Silence!" I cut off his reasoning. "Remember, this is war! We're going to fight for our food through the crowds! No mercy! No fear!"

"Fear of what?"

"The fear of getting something similar to a beer belly at the tender age of 16. Getting fat distributed around your waist instead of your boobs (unlike Sanae) of course!"

"But that's a problem that you'll probably face with age anyway..."

I threw out one of my infamous punches.

Masaki-san yelped as my fist connected with his jaw. He staggered slightly, clutching his face.

He will probably have to live on liquids for the next few days.

"... I'm not going to stop you. Do whatever you want," he croaked.

Finally! We have reached an understanding.

Not bad.

"May I ask a question, Sergeant?" he said, still rubbing his jaw.

"Ask away, private Masaki."

"Aren't we going to pay our respects?"

"We can do that tomorrow." I said, brushing him off.

"That's rude."

"Yeah, but so is our god." I reminded him.

"Masaki!!" With a loud voice, something barreled into Masaki-san's back, sending him flying forwards.

"Why does this keep happening!?" Masaki-san yelled as he crashed into a Teppanyaki stall.

"Oh no Masaki-san you're going to get burns on your face, but maybe guys with scars are kinda hot in a 'he looks like he has a dark past' kind of way!?"

"Please... Masaki Fry-faced Konno is the last thing I'd like to be."
Masaki groaned.

"Oooh, impressive! You actually managed to save yourself at the last second!" Just as the voice beside me observed, Masaki-san had used his arms to stop himself from falling face down on the Teppanyaki pan.

With his face inches away from the steaming surface, his eyes seemed to be watering from the heat.

But I had better things to be concerned about.

"Multitask No.1!" I declared.

"What? What do you mean 'multitask No.1'? Why are you looking at me like that, girl?" Shiro asked, confused.

Standing next to me was Masaki-san's girlfriend number one. Also known as Tagami's local god, Shiro-sama.

I felt a warm gust of air dampen my knees. I looked down to see Shiromaru, Shiro-sama's companion wolf she was straddled on, watching me with his golden eyes. I greeted him, and he made a small bark in return.

"How many times must I tell you?" Masaki-san grumbled as he returned with a few plastic bags filled with teppanyaki in his hands.

"I try, but I can't help myself when I see you." Shiro-sama said with a playful smirk. "Imagine a sailor's wife jumping into her husband's arms after his long voyage at sea."

"I'm not your husband." Masaki protested. It was something he said to Yuki often too.

"But you will be, soon," she replied.

"Enough talk!" I interrupted.

"Touyama?" Masaki blinked.

"Gimme that!!" I lunged forward and grabbed the bags from Masaki-san's hands. "That Teppanyaki stall was one of the stalls I had my eye on! Private Masaki, I am proud of your success on this mission."

"I just bought whatever was on the pan for the trouble we caused." Masaki muttered.

"Good thinking! I shall have to reward you! Put out your hands!"

"Will you just... oh, never mind." As if he had given up, Masaki-san put out his hands with his palms facing upwards.

"Treasure this. Make it into a family heirloom if need be." I placed a single gumball in his hand.

Masaki-san stiffened, his eyes on the small gumball rolling around on his palm.

Shiromaru looked sympathetic, and placed one paw on Masaki-san's knee. "*You can cry, you know.*"

Masaki-san began to sob. He must be overjoyed at the recognition he received.

Good man.

Even I felt a bit moved at the kindness I had shown.

Adventure Squad

It's a funny thing, but even the most irreligious people begin to believe when they stand in front of a Saisenbako.

If they were going to make a wish, they might as well pray hard in the hope that something might happen, even if they didn't believe in it.

"Here it goes!" I said as I tossed five yen into the box.

"Isn't that too little?" Shiro grumbled next to me as I placed my palms together.

"But it's tradition to put in five yen." I reminded her.

"Well then, put in several!" she demanded.

"Why are you complaining when it's better than nothing?"

"Because that's my ice-cream money." she said with a smirk.

"You're going to steal from the box?" I scolded.

"Hey, it's meant to be an offering to the gods in the first place. This might be Sakashima's shrine, but the god of this land has been absent for a long time. I see no problem in me taking it." she retorted matter-of-factly.

"Oh, good grief," I ignored her and turned towards the altar to make my prayers.

I thought about what I was going wish for, but didn't know what. It felt wrong to wish for something that had to do with my personal interests, so I decided I would wish for world peace.

Hmm, I wonder how much peace you could get for five yen.

"Darn, there's not much in there at all. I'll probably use all of that up before the day is over," she said.

With a god like this, I don't have high expectations.

Next to me, Masaki-san was praying in silence with his eyes closed. He had enough poise to be posing for a picture.

I whispered in his ear: "I don't know what you're wishing for, but I bet it's not going to come true."

"I just want to live a peaceful, normal life." He whispered back, as if in agony.

"What's wrong, Masaki? What's hurting you? If it won't kill you, it will make you stronger." Said one of the biggest reasons of his pain.

She really had no clue.

"Nanmadaida." I prayed. Instead of praying for world peace, I concluded it might be better to pray for Masaki-san's well-being.

I closed my eyes.

And there were bells, again.

"Hmm?" I murmured.

"Touyama?" Masaki asked, turning toward me.

I looked behind me to find people in line glaring impatiently at me. As soon as they met my eyes, they put on a cordial expression.

Masaki-san asked me what the matter was again.

Instead of answering, I looked around, searching.

"What is it, girl?" The god asked, amused.

Being immortal, it was natural for her to be curious about anything that might bring some excitement.

"Hey, the food might get cold." I changed the subject, pointing at the bags of food we were carrying.

Our bags now not only contained boxes of Teppanyaki, but a wide variety of food like chocolate covered bananas, noodles, and sweets.

Again the sound of bells.

"Let's find someplace to eat." Masaki-san said.

He wasn't smiling anymore, but searching the area the way I was, curious to what caught my attention.

"This way!" I pointed to the side, and we made our way out of the line.

Just as I thought, not many people walked behind the shrine. Their business was with everything in the front after all.

The three of us soon found ourselves in a rather quiet area at the back of the shrine where we could have our lunch.

We turned the corner.

"Hrrrr!" Shiro growled.

We halted, our feet making a noisy stop on the pebbles.

"Pebbles?" I thought aloud.

That was strange. Nobody walked here but us. The area should be covered in snow.

The white breath escaping from our lips reassured us it was, indeed, the dead of winter.

But there we were, standing in a circle of clean, bare ground.

I thought the area looked like it had been bombed.

As if all of the snow from one spot had been blown away forcefully.

"Sniff..." I heard the sound of a child crying.

Without thinking, I ran towards the sound.



"Are you lost?" I asked the sniffing small boy.

He was sitting against a pillar with his knees drawn to his chin.

I squatted before him so we could talk face to face.

"I-I... T-Toto-sama, Kaka-sama..." he blubbered.

It took me a few seconds to realize he was referring to his parents.

"You're lost, aren't you?" I asked.

He looked afraid, and jerked a little, as if he were thinking of running away.

But then he wiped his face with his kimono sleeve as if it was an attempt to brush his fear away.

His clothes were dirty and thin. I could tell he had worn them for a very long time.

"Don't worry, you'll be okay." I said as I stroked his head.

In truth, I didn't even know what would be okay at all.

But I did know it was something this child needed to hear.

"It's okay." I repeated. I remembered the way my mother used to put me to bed.

The child looked up at me.

He looked terrified.

"Where's your father?" I asked.

"..... He's gone," he whispered.

"Your mother?"

"..... She's gone, too," he said, tears welling up again.

I continued stroking his head, trying to offer comfort.

"Don't you have anybody?" I asked.

"Nene-sama," he murmured.

"That's your sister, right?" I prompted.

"But she's not here either, no one's here anymore," he said, voice barely audible.

I was about to say something awful.

Thankfully, I caught myself in time, but...

"Do you mean you don't have a family?" Masaki-san said it before I could stop him.

It was a horrible question to ask.

It was something that could crush the child if he had to admit it.

"Nene-sama..." the boy whispered again, clinging to the name like a lifeline.

My hands were useless now. No matter how much I stroked his head, it would do nothing. Not anymore.

"Nene-sama!" The boy burst into tears. He threw himself at me, hugging me fiercely as if his life depended on it.

I fell over.

I couldn't pull him away even if I wanted to.

"I'm h-h-here, Madoi's here," he sobbed.

His weight pressed me down to the ground, and I could feel the stones biting into my back.

"W-why, w-w-why..." He didn't seem to understand what he wanted to ask.

He just seemed so lost.

I could see Masaki-san watching me.

I hugged the child back. He was warm, and so small.

Masaki-san was wearing a gentle look of concern.

He looked as if to ask if I needed his help.

But at the same time, he looked as if he knew that the child needed me to say something, not him.

"I, um..." I searched for words, but whatever I said wouldn't change the situation.

I was just a stranger that happened to walk by.

I heard the plastic bags rustle on my arms.

"Oh!" My sudden exclamation caused the child to stiffen in surprise.
"Do you want any sweets!?"

Before he could react, I sat him up and jammed a hand into one of the bags.

"Eat this!" I said as I stuffed a large 30 yen melon flavored candy into his mouth.

I heard the sound of it clinking against his teeth.

"How do you like it?" I held my breath. It was the best I could do for him. I waited for him to savor it.

"It tastes really good," he said quietly.

The tension softened, like snow melting under sunlight. We sat together in silence for a while, letting the sweetness settle. Then, as if the world had gently resumed its rhythm, he spoke again.

"What is this called?" he asked.

"Chocolate-covered bananas," I replied.

"Mizuho Nene-sama knows a lot of strange things," he said, smiling faintly.

"Thanks, Madoi," I said, taking a sip from my can of milk tea.

The honden of the shrine sat on several fat pillars, and a wooden verandah ran all around. We made ourselves comfortable there, simply because we couldn't think of any other place where we could sit down and have our food.

"Got any rice wine?" Shiro asked

"Of course not," Masaki replied. "We're underage. Go buy some beer from the stalls if you need a fix."

"But I don't like beer!" she protested. "It fizzes and pops all over the place! I like rice wine better."

I wasn't paying much attention to Shiro and Masaki-san's banter. I was too busy watching Madoi eat.

He would nibble on his food just a little, as if he were testing for poison. And then he would take bigger bites of it.

Whenever he ate something sweet, he smiled adorably.

I could have watched him do that forever, but I knew I had questions to ask. So I began.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, turning towards him.

"...Y-yes..." He looked guarded again.

I glanced at Masaki-san. He was paying full attention to us. He nodded once, to urge me on.

"What did you mean when you said no one's here anymore?" I asked.

"I, I..." He stammered in his high, tiny voice.

I waited patiently.

"He means it literally," Shiro answered instead. "Everyone's dead. Only his sister remains, but she's disappeared. Isn't that right, god of Sakashima?"

"God?" I echoed, startled.

"You do realize he 'turned' the snow because of the power he has in him, don't you?" she continued. "What living human could make things disappear without touching them?"

I looked at the unnatural circle of bare ground around us.

Why didn't I notice it before?

"Sakashima holds the power of change," Shiro explained. "Everything turns upside down. That's the meaning of 'Sakashima', if you wrote it in its original kanji."

She turned her attention to Madoi "Child, do you know who I am?"

"The god of Tagami," Madoi replied softly.

"So you are aware. Why did you cross the boundary, then?" Shiro asked, her voice sharpening. "You know it is taboo to trespass onto another god's territory. There are rules."

"Because I have something to do here." Madoi said, his voice barely audible.

"Even if it meant Shiromaru here could bite your head off if I commanded him to?" she said, gesturing to the wolf at her feet.

Shiromaru's mouth twisted in a nasty smile. The wolf sleeping by her feet opened an eye to stare at Madoi, as if waiting for his call.

Madoi dropped his chocolate covered banana. The rainbow sprinkles that coated it scattered onto the ground.

"You do know I have every right to destroy you right here and now, don't you?" Shiro-sama's eyes gleamed. She looked powerful and in control.

Shiromaru was on his feet now, ready to pounce at any moment.

"I, I..." Madoi stammered.

"Speak properly, while I still have the patience to listen," Shiro snapped.

"I made a p-promise with T-t-toto-sama," he said, trembling.

"Hurry up. I don't have all day, and Shiromaru is getting hungry," she warned.

"B-but..." Madoi whimpered.

"Relax. If you're tense, you'll harden up. Shiromaru would prefer you tender," Shiro said with a cruel smile.

"Shiro-sama," I interrupted, stepping forward.

"Stay out of this. I'm having my fun-"

"Stop bullying him like that!" I shouted, punching her squarely on the head.

"W-wha..." she gasped.

"Why are you being so mean!? You're eating the food I provided, and you dare to pick on a child I've taken under my wing!? Sergeant Mizuho will not allow that!"

"Actually, I'm the one who bought the food..." Masaki-san muttered.

"Shut up!!" I yelled, throwing another punch at his jaw. He crumpled to the ground.

"Shiromaru, you aren't any better!" I snapped. "Why did you play along!? Madoi's terrified now! Apologize!"

"But, it's my job..."

"APOLOGIZE!!" I bellowed.

"M-my apologies, god of Sakashima."

"Good boy. I'll give you a sweet to reward you.," I said, reaching into the bag.

"I'm not a child!"

"Here, eat this! Super Jalapeno red-hot chili supreme candy!" I said as I generously fed it into his mouth.

"XXXXXXXXXXXX!! (*Unable to translate*)"

...On that day, a rumor spread amongst the town people that the horrible howl they heard coming from the mountains was the beginning of a curse of the last of the Japanese wolves... but that's another story.

".....I remember reading somewhere that it's pretty bad when animals faint with their tongues hanging out." Masaki-san commented as he studied Shiromaru, who had fainted with his eyes peeled white and his tongue hanging from the side of his mouth.

Occasionally the canine would spasm, making me feel uneasy.

"He'll manage. He is part god after all, isn't he?" I reasoned.

"God's can be slain in certain circumstances, you know," Shiro-sama said. "Girl, you are quite destructive."

"I'm human, what do you expect?" I replied.

"Heh, couldn't have put it better myself," she chuckled.

Looking amused, Shiro patted Shiromaru on the side, although it provided little comfort.

"Can you tell me what you're here for?" I asked Madoi.

"To keep a promise to Toto-sama," he said.

"Is it a secret? Something you can't tell me?" I pressed.

"Um..." he hesitated.

"Well then, give me a hint," I said.

"What's a hint?" he asked, tilting his head.

"It means something that will help me guess what it's about," I explained, passing him a cookie.

Madoi nibbled on it thoughtfully.

"Madoi is looking for something." He said as he finished his treat.

"That's it?" Masaki-san urged.

"The powers Madoi needs to become a proper Tochigami are hidden here in Tagami," he explained. "Madoi must find them."

"Why would anyone hide your powers here?" I asked.

"It's quite common in legend for gods to hide their powers," Masaki replied.

"Really? I didn't know that." I said.

"That's because you're uneducated." Shiro replied smugly.

"Hey!!" I protested.

"There are always humans who want to steal power from a god," Shiro explained. "Gods who fear them will either remove themselves from reach or hide their powers in something they deem safe."

"How about you, Shiro-sama?" I asked.

"Do I seem like that type to you?" she said, flashing a cheeky smile.

She looked like she was enjoying my confusion, but I couldn't tell for sure.

"Well... okay then, I think I understand that bit. But I have another question, sensei!" I said.

"Ask," she replied.

"You mentioned that Tochigami aren't allowed in territories belonging to other Tochigami?"

"No crossing of boundaries. Don't humans set borders too? Besides, under normal circumstances it would be nearly impossible to do so." Shiro stroked a gap in between two planks of wood with her finger.

"After all... who in his right mind would forgive an invasion?" She placed a can of juice on each side of the gap.

"But Madoi made his way here," Masaki-san said as he pushed one can to the other side, making the two cans touch.

"It's not as if I'm always aware when someone manages to cross the boundary. Sometimes, in a moment of carelessness, you make a slip. Same with gods." Shiro glanced at Madoi, and quickly looked away again.

"That also explains why Madoi is able to retain some of his powers here," she continued. "In some sense, I have 'allowed' him in. I haven't done anything to destroy him after he's managed to step on my grounds."

"How were you careless?" Masaki asked.

"It's the New year." Shiro said simply.

"Is it usual for your powers to weaken in the beginning of the year?" Masaki-san asked curiously, but Shiro shook her head.

"I was just too busy eating the offerings and scrounging money off the Saisenbako," she admitted. "Can't be bothered to go see what's wrong when the boundary malfunctions."

"Do your job!!" Masaki-san and I cried out in unison.

"Hey, even you guys have holidays. Why can't I slack off once in a while?" Shiro grumbled.

"Ugh, I really didn't want to know." I groaned.

"Well... there are stories about Gods setting up an annual 'rest day' in mythology too..." Masaki-san reasoned with his weird logic.

"Anyways, it doesn't sound like too big of a problem." I muttered.

"Mizuho Nene-sama knows about my powers?" Madoi asked, looking at me hopefully.

"No I don't, but..." I began.

"But...?" he prompted.

"We've got our local god right here, who would know everything about anything on this land," I said, gesturing to Shiro. "Tell us where it is, Shiro-sama."

"How would I know?" Shiro replied, raising an eyebrow.

"You're joking, right?" I asked in disbelief.

"You believe so thoroughly that, as a god, I can do anything. Why do you assume that?" Shiro asked, sighing.

"It's just more convenient if you do," I said with a shrug.

"Convenient for you, not for me," Shiro sighed, exasperated.

"You really don't know anything, Shiro-sama?" Masaki-san repeated.

"I am the god of Tagami. I know about things related to Tagami, but nothing about Sakashima. I have neither the desire, nor the need to know. Just as the child here only knows my name."

"I see," Masaki-san nodded. "So, what now?"

He turned to me.

"What now?" I repeated.

"Mizuho Nene-sama?" Madoi looked worried.

I didn't understand the question.

Because it was so obvious what we should do.

I stood up. "Attention comrades!"

"Wh-wha!?" Madoi gasped.

"Private Konno Masaki, Private Shiro-sama, Private Shiromaru, please welcome our newest member, Private Madoi!!"

"Huh!? What?!" Masaki muttered.

"She's gone mad," Shiro remarked.

"I never signed up for this."

Despite their gripes, I remained focused: "Here, we face a grave problem that may have countless obstacles!"

I paused for dramatic effect. My comrades looked at me speechless. Good. They must be mesmerized by my charisma.

"However, we shall overcome every one of them! Think of the adventure awaiting us! The excitement! The romance! We shall do the impossible and overcome difficulties with the strength, courage, and passion we have in our hearts!"

"Those are probably the qualities we lack the most," Masaki muttered.

"We shall succeed gloriously - kind of - in every mission. The people shall shout our name in awe. We are..."

Here, I pointed towards the vast blue sky-

"The Mizuho Touyama Adventure Squad!!"

And thus, our January story begins.

Before we get started

"So that's what happened during the New Year. Masaki, say Ah-."

"Uh, I thought we agreed on having another pair of chopsticks." Masaki whined.

"It was unreal. I come home tired, and there's Mizuho and a god sitting in the kotatsu eating oranges in our own living room!" Kouhei rambled. "...Hey, this is really good! It's just right."

"Of course it's just right, I made it to suit your tastes." Sanae said. "If you want, I could make lunch for you everyday!"

"Masaki, maybe you should ask Sanae to make your lunch too." Kouhei chuckled. "She's really good at cooking to your taste. Who knows, she might actually figure out your preferences better than Mami-chan does."

"Yuki's lunch suits me fine." Masaki said flatly. "Or rather, that was insensitive of you Kouhei"

"Huh? Why?" my brother asked, dense as ever.

"Ugh, Kouhei you idiot!" Sanae scowled.

"He really needs help, doesn't he, Masaki-san?" I murmured.

"Big help." Masaki whispered back. "I didn't think he was this bad."

"Hey, are you guys making fun of me?" Kouhei grumbled.

"Young man, you haven't eaten much. Here, use this." Yuki said, handing over a clean pair of chopsticks.

"Yuki, you did bring another pair!" Masaki looked as if he's been waiting years for this moment.

"It's not for you," Yuki replied coldly.

"Oh, please for god's sake!" Masaki pleaded.

"Why yes, it is 'for god's sake'." Yuki joked.

I was about to say something to Masaki-san ,who had his forehead pressed on the table now, but Madoi pulled on my sleeve.

"Mizuho Nene-sama," he murmured.

"Sorry they're such a noisy bunch," I passed him the pair of chopsticks Yuki had prepared for him.

He must have been feeling out of place since he wasn't used to the group yet.

"Madoi-kun, are you living with Mizuho now?" Sanae asked.

"My grandmother insisted on it." I explained.

"Old people tend to be religious." Kouhei remarked.

Madoi had mentioned how he intended to stay in Tagami for as long as it would take to find Sakashima's true powers.

"I didn't think you were serious when you said your plan was to tough it out on the streets though." I said.

"Because Madoi doesn't know anybody here," he said sheepishly.

"So, we took him in." Kouhei smiled.

"Mizuho Nene-sama, Madoi is secretly a bit scared of Onii-chan."

"You'll have to get used to this creature."

"You're calling your own brother a creature?" Kouhei scowled. "Oi, Madoi, stop clinging onto Mizuho like that."

"Nene-sama..." Madoi whimpered.

"Wait a sec, I'm trying to eat,"

"Nene-sama, am I too much trouble for you?" Madoi asked as tears began to well up.

"What kind of question is that!?"

It was getting increasingly difficult to separate myself from Madoi. He clung to me the way a child starved for affection would.

Just this morning he crawled into my futon to stay with me.

"Aren't you the baby! Do you want some oranges?" Sanae passed an orange to Madoi.

Just like that, Madoi let go of me and used all of his concentration to peel it.

"What do you intend to do, Mizuho?" Yuki asked the inevitable question.

"Uh, that's actually what I wanted to discuss with you all."

Yuki tilted her head. "I thought you were going to look for his powers."

Yes, that was exactly what I intended to do.

Which is why I had several things to discuss.

"Well then, do you know what his powers might look like?"

"That's..." Yuki paused with her chopsticks mid-air as the problem dawned on her.

"We know it's somewhere in this town," I said "but we don't have a clue what we're supposed to be looking out for."

"Doesn't Madoi know?" Kouhei asked.

I shook my head. Madoi was still peeling his orange, slow and careful.

"It was his father that last had it," I explained "So he's never seen it before."

"Then why doesn't he ask his fa-..."

I silenced Yuki with a look, and a flash of understanding went through her eyes.

"...I see. It must be hard for him," She nodded

Kouhei leaned back. "So you wanted to discuss what to do?"

"Yeah."

"But if Madoi doesn't know, how do you expect us to know any better?" Kouhei asked. "Besides, aren't you the leader of the Adventure Squad? I'd imagine it would be your job to come up with something."

"Y-yeah, but I thought maybe if we brainstormed..."

"We can't really get any good ideas if we don't know what we're looking for!"

"You too, Sanae?" I sighed.

"I don't think discussing it would be productive either," Yuki explained "You aren't asking for answers, you're asking us what questions to ask when we don't know anything more than you do. Whatever we come up with would be useless."

I knew I didn't have enough material to begin a discussion, and with my two best friends against me I didn't know where to start. I had mulled over it all night.

Even to my own ears, I sounded like a sulky brat.

I picked on my food. I felt so powerless, so depressed.

To solve a problem, you needed a question and an answer.

Even if you knew what the answer was, nothing would be resolved if you didn't know what the answer was.

In quiz shows everything comes into place smoothly, but reality rarely works that way.

"Reality is merciless." I sighed.

"That's my quote." Masaki chuckled.

I turned to him. "Well then Private Masaki, do you have any bright ideas?"

He shrugged, but his tone shifted. "Do some research in history."

I blinked. "What?"

"Sakashima must have a history of it's own," Masaki reasoned "Look up any records on it's past, myths, or traditions. There's bound to be some kind of information on the powers of its god."

"You make it sound as easy as looking it up in a dictionary," I muttered, but really he was right.

That was the most logical thing to do, but where would we even start?

"Who would even document that kind of information?" Onii-chan said what I was thinking out loud.

Masaki replied without hesitation. "Probably nobody in Sakashima."

"You mean there could be records here?" Sanae asked.

"Unlike other places. our local god makes her presence known around here," Masaki explained. "She makes gods seem accessible. Surely there is a professor of some sort who would take an interest in studying what a god actually is."

"But then Shiro-sama would be the subject. Why would they study the god of Sakashima?" Kouhei asked.

Masaki's voice was quiet but firm. "We don't really have any other choice, do we?"

"Point taken." Onii-chan agreed after a moment of thought.

I stood and began gathering my things. "Well then, shall we head to the library?"

Masaki turned to Yuki. "Yuki?"

She looked up. "What is it Masaki?"

"Your home. There are several warehouses on it's premises, aren't there?"

"About ten of them," Yuki replied, narrowing her eyes. "Why?"

"Straight records from the past would be valuable in this case," Masaki explained. "There are only a few people that could possibly own the documents we're looking for. Like a family with enough

wealth to spend on education, collect a multitude of intellectual property, and preserve it for centuries..."

"My family." Yuki answered easily. "But... our warehouses contain many valuable things, and we rarely let anybody who isn't family in. Even I have been in them only a couple of times."

"Yuki," Masaki-san took her hands in his. "Please?"

"I'll go talk to mother now!" Yuki rushed out of the classroom, leaving her lunchbox open on the table.

She could have just made a phone call, but being someone that wasn't good with technology, she hadn't gotten accustomed to using the cellphone she bought last year.

It didn't cross her mind that she could have asked someone else to call for her instead.

"Well, that's fixed," Masaki-san muttered.

"My friend, you're going to rot in hell someday," Kouhei said.

"I'm already there Kouhei, trust me." Masaki-san looked like a man who had accepted his fate.

"Mizuho Nene-sama! Look!!" Madoi held up his orange peel proudly.

He had managed to peel it in one piece without breaking so that it resembled a spring.

A visit to Towada

"Mizuho Touyama Adventure Squad, take your positions!!"

"A... Achoo!!" Yuki sneezed.

"Wow! There are so many books here!" Madoi said, marveling at the shelves.

"Come on you all, show some enthusiasm!! Madoi, don't touch."

"It was really hard to convince mother to let us have access to thi... achoo!!"

"Mashiro-san backed me into a corner just now, asking if I was ready to marry into Towada."

It looked like my friends had gone through a few obstacles already.

"Never mind! Forget about that!" I struck a pose, pointing at the piles of books in the warehouse.

Initially I had thought we would have to go through all ten of the warehouses to search for records, but the Towadas were an organized lot.

They kept all of their documents and important papers in one warehouse, so all we had to do was go through the one we were in.

I slowly relaxed my 'Touyama Adventure Squad pose' (the one I had come up with overnight), and felt my shoulders drop.

"Masaki-san, I didn't think there would be THIS many documents," I said.

"Well, if you think this is hard, think again. It's going to get worse." Masaki-san stroked the spine of an old book with his finger, and a clump of dust fell to the floor.

"Achoo!" Yuki took a step back, her eyes red from allergy.

"I-I'll be in my room!" She cried and ran out without waiting for an answer.

"She's too clean. She has no tolerance for dust." Masaki-san said as he opened a book.

"That didn't sound like a compliment," I muttered.

"It was just an observation." He turned towards me with the book in his hand, as if to remind me what we were here for.

"Alright, alright. I'll get on with it." I sighed as I grabbed a book
"We'll just start from here... wah!?"

"I told you, it's going to get worse."

I finally understood his point. I looked at the squiggles of old Japanese calligraphy on the faded yellow pages. It could be something important, but...

"It's impossible to read!" I exclaimed.

The brush strokes reminded me of the English cursive writing we had to practice in class, except this was vertical.

Being used to the modern printed page, I wasn't familiar with this ancient style of calligraphy.

Three, two, one...

"I give up!" I lifted my hands in defeat.

"-Nah, just kidding." I couldn't give up. Not really. Madoi depended on us.

I sighed and looked at Masaki-san. He had a frown on his face and was concentrating on the book he was holding.

If it was hard for him, it was nearly impossible for me.

I decided I wouldn't try to decipher everything on the page, but instead look at whatever characters I could read and piece the clues together.

I remembered someone saying that the perfect translation software would need years to complete. Soon enough, I was wearing a frown on my face too.

It helped that Kanji was made from certain particles, each symbolic of a meaning. That was my only chance of making anything out at all.

"Boundary." I stopped after counting ten characters of the same meaning.

Boundary. Something that divided something from the other.

Shiro had described it as something that sectioned the lands.

Boundaries could be everywhere, in anything. However, whether you noticed it or not was an entirely different matter.

"What is this 'Boundary' about?" I muttered to myself.

I scanned the page for anything that looked connected to the word. There was something about it that caught my attention.

"Ugh!!" My head was overheating. I slapped the book shut, causing a cloud of dust to puff up into the air. I sneezed the way Yuki did.

"Masaki-san?" I called out. The warehouse was built sturdily, and its thick walls cut off all of the sound from outside.

It was silent.

I could hear every patter Madoi made as he ran around curiously.

Masaki-san didn't answer.

I noticed a staircase cutting across the room diagonally, leading up towards the ceiling.

There was a square opening that led to what appeared to be the attic.

"Masaki-san!" I shouted.

"I can hear you," he replied.

"Well then, why didn't you answer me?" I asked as I began to make my way up the stairs.

"Good timing," Masaki-san said as soon as I climbed to the top. He seemed to have been waiting to show me something.

"Touyama, do you know where the name of Tagami town comes from?" he asked.

"It's derived from the character for 'wolf', isn't it?"

"Yes, you could say that. Now, why would the servants of our god have a town named after them?"

".....Um, because wolves are easy to remember?" I was pretty sure that was the wrong answer, but I said it anyway.

"That's what we would think using our convenient human logic," Masaki-san said. "Shiro-sama mentioned it's actually derived from a

different character, not meaning 'wolf' but meaning 'many gods'. She also said that the ruling Tochigami often had something to do with the name of the land."

"What are you trying to tell me?" I asked as I walked over to him.

"Can you tell me the origin of the name, Sakashima?" he asked back.

I shook my head.

"Sakashima comes from the meaning 'upside down'. The god there has the power to turn things into the opposite of what they are," he explained. "The ability to switch things from here to there..."

"He rules the boundaries." I said automatically.

"Yes, he does." Masaki-san smiled, his eyes still on the pages of the book. He looked like a teacher pleased with his student.

"It says here that the land of Sakashima was originally considered the area that divided our world from the underworld, and occasionally it was used to reverse both sides in rituals." He turned a page. "Several hundred years ago, it says there used to be a sacred area in Sakashima known as the land of turning."

"What's that?" I asked.

"To put it simply, it's the place where you go after death," he said.

"Wow, I've never seen so many books before!" I heard Madoi exclaim.

I was being overly sensitive to picking up his voice, wherever he was.

"So, Madoi is the god of death?" I asked

"No, it's just one facet of him that he is able to 'turn' things," Masaki-san replied.

That sounded better. I didn't want to believe that small child was something akin to the grim reaper.

"And, what does that have to do with what we're trying to do?" I asked.

"Nothing much, really."

"Oi!!" I snapped.

"I am under the impression that we need all the information we can get," He explained "Before you complain, can you tell me if you've found anything that could help us?"

".....Nothing." I admitted.

Sometimes Masaki Konno could sound very cold, like he's pushing you away.

I craned my head over his shoulder, curious to know if the book he had was something easier to read compared to the squiggles I saw previously.

"There are many boundaries in our world," he said. "They're not something we're aware of most of the time. Take, for example, the border between understanding something and not. It can be a tiny shift in perception, or a thought completely opposite of the truth."

Masaki-san was talkative when it came to subjects like these.

"Would it connect to what we're looking for?" I asked.

For the first time, he lifted his face from the book.

I couldn't read his expression.

It would be easy for him to say yes or no.

Whatever answer I got, I would have nodded in agreement.

But that wouldn't have changed anything. We needed progress.

"Do you have any suggestions, Private Masaki?" I asked

"In myths, gods usually hid their powers in solid objects," he said.

"You did mention that before," I replied.

"I was hoping we could find something about that." Masaki-san closed the book.

"You're saying we should look for a vessel of some sort, although we don't know what it is?" I asked.

"At the moment, that's all we can do."

I felt my lips form a pout. We now had more information about Madoi's powers, but we still didn't know where to look.

"The good news is, if it's kept in something, there's a good chance it's in one of the warehouses here."

"So this is all we've got," I sighed.

"Hey, don't look so down. You're the leader, remember?" Masaki-san ruffled my hair.

"Yeah, I know. I'll do it somehow."

"Good luck."

I studied him, and he looked genuinely kind. Compassionate.

The complete opposite of the cold, practical person he was minutes ago.

Which was the real Masaki Konno? What separated the two?

Just like the talk we had before, I wanted to know where his boundaries lay.

"Ow!!"

"Madoi!?" Masaki-san reacted quickly. He immediately leaped down the stairs, and I ran after him.

A cloud of dust had erupted in the warehouse, spreading into every corner.

"Madoi!!" I held my breath and jumped down too, holding my sleeve up to my mouth as soon as I landed.

Several books had fallen from the impact. I tried not to trip.

"Nene-sama?"

"Stay where you are!"

I ran towards the sound of his voice. The light coming from the high window reflected on the dust, clouding my vision.

I almost lost Masaki-san when he ran through the shadows.

"He tripped." Masaki-san explained the situation flatly.

"I tried to look for you." Madoi was on the floor in the middle of a pile of scattered books.

He must have tripped over a stack of them.

"Look at you. You're a mess!" I knelt down before him and swatted the large balls of dust off his hair.

"Hee," Madoi giggled.

"Why are you looking so happy?"

"You came when Madoi needed you." He said it as if it were a miracle.

Every child should be able to ask for help and receive it, to have somebody they could depend on.

But it was obvious from his reaction, it had never been like that for him.

I couldn't imagine the loneliness and insecurity he must have felt during his long solitude.

Anger boiled inside of me. I wanted to shout at his parents for leaving him alone.

"Of course I will come when you need me."

I knew it was a promise that probably couldn't be met every time. At the same time, I thought perhaps this was why growing up was so hard. Being an adult meant you had to take responsibilities and try, even when you knew it was nearly impossible.

"Come on, stand up." I slid my hands under his armpits to pull him up.

"Ow!" As soon as he stood up, he wobbled and fell down again.

"Are you hurt?"

"Madoi feels a bit woozy."

He did look a bit off-balance. Maybe he was dizzy from the impact.

"Let's stop here today and go home." Masaki-san suggested.

I started picking up the fallen books from the floor.

"It's almost sunset." Madoi muttered.

He was right. The light outside of the windows had gone dim.

"Didn't find out much today," I muttered to myself as I continued to clean up.

I didn't feel as if I had established anything at all.

The only success we had was Masaki-san finding that little passage about Madoi's powers. Tomorrow, we could start looking through the warehouses one by one.

"Urgh!" I let out another sigh of frustration.

"Something tore." Madoi said sheepishly.

"Huh?" I asked, stacking the last book on the pile I was making.

"That..." He gestured towards Masaki-san, who was holding a ripped piece of paper in his hands.

"What!?" I exclaimed.

"It looks like a picture," Madoi said.

"Touyama..." Masaki-san murmured

"Oh no..." I whispered.

"Masaki-sama, Nene-sama, are you alright?"

"It looks really expensive." I muttered.

"I'm sure it IS pretty expensive." Masaki-san said, his face now pale.

The torn edge of the tapestry he had in his hands floated gently in the air.

"Yuki did mention there were a lot of valuables in here."

"D-did Madoi do something bad?" Madoi asked on the verge of tears.

"Uh, no, no, no!" I quickly denied. "It's alright, it's okay! Masaki Two-timing Konno here will eventually marry into this family, so he will broach the subject when the timing is right and all shall be forgiven."

"Mizuho-san, please don't decide on my future for me!" Masaki-san protested. "I won't be used like that!"

"Problem solved!" I declared, grabbing Madoi's hand. "Let's get out of here!"

"Hey!" Masaki-san shouted after us.

"I thought I heard a noise in here," Yuki said as she came down the steps "Are you all still continuing your search?"

I seized my opportunity "Oh, Yuki, good timing. Masaki-san has just agreed to marry into Towada."

"Really!?" Yuki gasped, clapping her hands. "This calls for a celebration!"

"Will somebody please listen to me!?" Masaki-san cried, exasperated.

"Um... congratulations, Masaki-sama," Madoi said innocently.

A few minutes later, Masaki-san was dragged away by Yuki and Mashiro-san, one on each side grabbing his arms like a captive alien. I wished him luck.

After we got home, I drew a warm bath for me and Madoi.

The amount of steam rising from the hot bath was almost suffocating. A mechanical rubber ducky, the type that paddled its feet when you turned the key on its back, was swimming in circles on the water.



"It's not good enough?" I asked.

"No, it's not good enough," Madoi replied, his tone flat.

I was scrubbing Madoi's back using a washcloth. The first time I put him in a bath, the soap didn't lather at all, which implied he hadn't taken a bath in ages.

It was frankly disgusting.

But now, he seemed quite comfortable in the bathroom.

"Every body is looking for Madoi's powers?" he asked.

"Yes," I said with a sigh, my breath brushing his small, white back.
"But we don't have a clue where it is."

I was trying to look for something when I didn't have a clue what I was looking for.

It was almost impossible to do. Looking for the next big thing at Comiket seemed a lot easier than this.

"You don't have to look for it, you know," Madoi murmured.

"Stop that!!" I threw a bucket of warm water over him.

"Pffff!!" Madoi sputtered.

I threw a few more for good measure.

"Is Nene-sama being a meanie?" he asked, pouting.

"No! Sorry, sorry!" I said quickly, hands raised in apology.

There I was, begging for forgiveness in the bath.

"Well," I said softly, leaning forward and pressing my forehead to his back. He was very warm. "I thought I could do it."

"Madoi thinks you're making a lot of effort, Nene-sama," he said gently. "Madoi appreciates it."

"If I can't provide the results, it's meaningless!" I snapped. "It's all about results in the professional world!"

"What's a professional?" he asked, giggling. I could feel his back shake with laughter.

And then we fell silent.

I could hear the cars passing by outside the house.

I had believed we could do anything.

I was so confident that as long as we tried, we would succeed.

But here we were, stuck.

I felt like a failure, as if I had let Madoi down.

I could only apologize.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's okay," Madoi said. "Madoi doesn't need you to look for it."

What do you mean, I almost asked.

"Madoi has always searched for it, alone," he said quietly.

I could hear the water draining down the pipes.

"Toto-sama, Kaka-sama, and Nene-sama all left," he continued. "So Madoi is used to searching alone."

I didn't know what to say. I could feel him trembling.

"That's why, you don't have to do this Nene-sama," he said. "You don't need to apologize."

"Madoi..." I murmured, dispensing a large amount of shampoo onto his head.

"Huh?" he said, blinking.

"Is there anywhere else you'd like a better washing, Sir!?" I asked, scrubbing his hair vigorously.

I didn't like the way the conversation was going.

It wasn't like me, Mizuho Touyama, to stay in a dark mood forever.

"You said you wouldn't use any soap that would sting Madoi's eyes!" he protested.

"Bad promises are made to be broken!!" I declared. "Take that! Mwahaha!"

I scrubbed him thoroughly.

"Phew," I sighed.

Several minutes later, Madoi was in the bath, sighing blissfully.

He would fight me when I scrubbed him, but once he was clean he did seem to enjoy a good soak. I found it adorable.

"Tut tut!" I teased. "You may say you're reluctant, but your body says otherwise!"

"Madoi has a feeling Nene-sama is trying to sound sleazy," Madoi murmured, and he was right.

"Well, anywhere else you need me to wash?" I asked.

"In front," he said as he turned towards me.

I stiffened.

"Nene-sama?" he asked.

"I-in front!?" I squawked. "Wherever did you learn how to make such lewd requests like that! Mizuho Nene-sama hasn't brought you up that way!"

He looked at me confused. I didn't think he was acting to look innocent.

"The front of Madoi's head isn't rinsed properly," he said.

"The front of your head?" I repeated, my hands shielding my eyes (Of course with my fingers splayed).

"Nene-sama, what did you think I meant?" he asked.

"I'm not going to answer that question," I muttered.

It had something to do with my dignity.

I felt like a pervert now, and was kind of embarrassed.

I reached out to wash his hair, then suddenly...

"You're making a big mistake Mizuho!! Stop before you do something you'll regret!!" Onii-chan burst into the bathroom with a baseball bat in his hand.

"I knew this would happen someday!" he shouted. "It doesn't matter if you're a god, if you're going to try to seduce my pretty little sister into doing something dir-..."

"It's getting into Madoi's eyes."

I was in the middle of shampooing Madoi again.

"Stop spying on us, you ass!" I yelled, throwing the conditioner at him.

"Oof!!" he grunted as it hit.

Like a human

Always do your best to be prepared. It was a saying everybody used often, and how true it was.

"Thank you for your time," I said with a bow.

"The food was good. I'm coming again," Shiro said politely.

The search in the Towada ware houses unearthed nothing, and the adventure squad was at a dead end.

The only thing left I could do was visit each house in town to see if anybody knew any rumors or held any documents regarding Sakashima.

I looked at the 1/500 map I had made overnight and pressed a red stamp on the area I had just visited with a determined hand. By now, the map was covered in red ink from my unfruitful efforts.

"Show some manners!" I scolded.

"Hey stop that!" Shiro protested.

Ignoring Shiro-sama's protests, I used my right hand to press her head down in a bow.

"Sorry I wasn't much help." Grandpa Tagami smiled apologetically as he bowed to me, a girl half a century younger than he was.

"Remember to stock up on some ice-cream before my next visit."

I punched Shiro-sama in the head and ignored her complaining that followed soon after.

"You could stay a while longer. My grand-daughter should be home soon," Grandpa Tagami offered.

"It's alright. I see Sakura everyday at school," I replied.

"I hear you've been wandering the streets lately," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Wandering? No, I'm not walking the streets aimlessly," I insisted.

"Heh, I suppose I'm more likely to wander the streets in a few years," He joked.

"I-I never meant to imply that!" I stammered. "You're in good health..."

Grandfather Tagami, and the rest of his family for all I knew, were known to be pretty blunt with a wicked sense of humor.

"If you remember anything about Sakashima, will you let me know?" I asked.

"I'll have Sakura carry a message," he promised.

"Thank you!" I beamed and took my leave.

But it was hard to fake a smile for long. Especially when I knew I wasn't going anywhere with my mission.

The sun set early in January, and the town was already cloaked in darkness.

"Well, that's half of the town done." I muttered as I made my way under a street lamp, spreading the map open with my hands.

Half of the map was covered in red, but there still wasn't any progress.

I was worried I might not find anything even if I covered the rest of the town.

"You sure are tenacious, I'll give you that," Shiro said, peering over my shoulder.

"Chin up Miss, There's always tomorrow."

Shiro-sama peered over my shoulder to study my map. She was riding Shiromaru again, in her usual style. This was supposed to be a legendary god riding her powerful steed, but to me she just looked like somebody too lazy to walk.

"To think I would be consoled by a dog," I mumbled.

"Hey, I'm actually part god too!?"

"Hmm," Shiro-sama craned her neck and squinted at the map with her sharp golden eyes. For a moment, she really did look like a legendary goddess.

"Found something?" I asked.

"Here," she said, pointing at the map.

"Ugh!!" I groaned.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"That's Moyori Uesugi's house," I groaned. "I really don't want to go there."

Moyori Uesugi was the heir to the renowned Uesugi Rice Wine Brewery. She lived near Sakashima Shrine, the very same shrine we visited a few days ago for New Year. She was also a member of the Student Council.

She was our treasurer, in charge of the council finances, and constantly insisted that I...

"No no no no no!! No more documents! Please, no more!!" I cried.

"Girl, what's gotten into you!?" Shiro asked, startled.

"No more numbers! No more maths!" I wailed.

"Looks like I've triggered some trauma of yours," she said, amused by my anguish. "Calm down, she isn't here."

"You're not going to bully me?" I asked warily.

"Statement of accounts," She said with a mischievous grin.

"NO!!!" I dropped to my knees in a begging position.

"She's sick. Mentally."

"Get up girl, you'll freeze," Shiro said.

"You're not going to bully me further?" I asked.

"(Insert anything that has to do with finances here)"

"!!!!(Insert incoherent scream in response here)"

"Okay, I've had my fun." After repeating the same pattern of torture a few more times, Shiro-sama was finally satisfied and walked away.

Well, Shiromaru walked away, carrying her.

I vowed in my heart that soon I would have my revenge.

I ran after her feeling broken.

"But why did you suggest going to Uesugi's house?" I asked. "It's in the other direction."

The road was dim now that we had walked away from the street lamp. I used my finger to point out where we were on the map, near Grandpa Tagami's house.

I dragged my finger to the left. Uesugi Brewery, which was in Sakashima Town, lay in the opposite direction of the neighborhood we covered today.

There were still many houses I had to visit in the area we were in. I didn't think it would be efficient to jump from one area to another before covering all of the houses.

It would be a waste of time walking back and forth since the distance was pretty far.

"Is it because you think the Uesugi family will have some useful information?"

It was a possibility, come to think of it. They were a rich family living near the border of Tagami and Sakashima.

"Well..." Shiro-sama looked hesitant, but gave way to honesty in the end.

"Uesugi feeds me well when I visit," she admitted.

"This map isn't meant to be used for your gourmet expeditions!!" I shouted, punching her.

I punched and punched and punched her hard.

"You...!! Show some respect! I am your god!!" Shiro cried, clutching her head in pain.

Looks like I got my revenge earlier than expected.

"Ugh! None of you are being helpful!" I exclaimed as I stamped my foot.

"Are you hungry? Getting very irritable?" Shiro asked.

"No I'm not!" I yelled. "It's not that. Masaki-san and Onii-chan are busy helping out at Sanae's, Sanae is busy helping out her mom, Yuki is busy training, and Madoi caught a cold and can't come out..."

I was beginning to get annoyed with Madoi. It was his problem, but he wasn't doing anything to help.

After our search at Yuki's house, he'd fallen ill and even lost his appetite. I guess there isn't much he could do now anyway.

Maybe I hadn't been a good leader, and I needed to persuade my squad members to help more.

I glared out at the dark, empty road.

"Aren't you the optimistic one," Shiro said dryly.

"Thanks for the sarcasm," I grumbled.

"At least you acknowledged it," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That deep down, you know what you're doing is useless," she said.

".....I know," I said as I frowned at my own admission.

The search in the Towada warehouse didn't unearth any further information.

Even though we knew Madoi was looking for his powers, it wasn't enough.

I felt like I had to do something even if I didn't know what, but that alone was pointless.

Masaki-san must have realized this long ago, and Madoi probably did too.

Volunteering to stick my head into this problem was a stupid thing to do, and it was probably easier to dig for hidden gold than search for a god' long-lost powers.

"Dammit!!" I shouted, giving the snow a hard kick.

Snow sprayed up and above my head, then scattered around me in a messy descent.

The snow I had kicked up was just a miniscule amount compared to all of the snow that had fallen that day.

It was a reminder that I was a small, small human being. There wasn't much I could do.

"It's your fault for slacking off on that day, so Madoi got in! Now you'll have to help me fix this!" I snapped.

"Hey, that's unfair. You're just venting on me," Shiro said.

"Because I'm angry!" I shouted.

"There's nothing you can do about what you don't know," she said.
"Although it is your own fault that you don't know any better."

Knowledge is power she said, and she was right.

"But why did Madoi... or rather, Madoi's father come to Tagami in the first place?" I asked.

"Don't ask me," Shiro replied.

"I want to hear your opinion," I said.

"Oh-ho," Shiro crowed and turned to study me with a look of curiosity.



"You're talking like Masaki now," She said as she got off Shiromaru.
"He asked me a question too. Right here in the same spot."

"What did he ask?"

"About being a god," she replied.

The snow absorbed every sound around us. The silence was deafening.

"You're asking why the god of Sakashima crossed the boundary to Tagami, correct?"

"Yes." I quietly nodded.

She wasn't talking to me like the cheeky, obnoxious goddess we knew so well. She was speaking to me as if I was a lifeform well

below her. she was speaking to me like a god.

"There are two types of gods people believe in," she explained. "The God Almighty, and a cluster of gods and spirits that reside in all sorts of forms."

"You're speaking of monotheism and polytheism?"

"You're more informed than I thought," she said.

"Masaki-san is enthusiastic about topics like these."

"Well, then what would be the difference between these gods?"

"Power." I answered.

"Authority, more like it," she corrected.

"Aren't they the same?" I asked.

"There is a difference," she explained. "You either have more authority or not, and what you have authority over distinguishes you from all the other gods. The gods in the west tend to be collective, while we in the east chose to be distributive."

"I still think they are the same," I admitted. I didn't understand what she was trying to say.

"So what would happen if a monotheist god dies?" she asked.

"If they are the one and only, wouldn't that mean there wouldn't be a god anymore?...Oh!" I exclaimed as I realized her point.

"In polytheism, if one of us dies there will always be another to take over," she said. "I suppose it could be considered 'load distribution' in modern language."

I remembered Masaki-san mentioned that our god loved to read and even had her own library card.

"Okay, I understand what you mean by a monotheist god being almighty now," I said, "but what happens if the almighty screws up?"

"As far as I know, nothing like that has ever happened before. Ever," she replied.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because if you were an almighty god that has chosen the collective path, you would do everything in your power to keep yourself alive," she explained.

"What does that have to do with Madoi's father?" I asked.

"The distributive path can be... difficult," she said solemnly. "Some gods would dream of a different way."

The roads were dark. Shiromaru silently led the way a few steps before us.

"Unlike the western gods, being distributive means we are each an individual," she continued. "We may not agree on everything. There are many ways of thinking, both for humans and for gods."

"So there are some that disagree with the way of being a god?" I asked.

From the way the story was heading, I imagined some kind of unbeatable final boss from an RPG.

"...No matter how they wished for something else, it would just be that: an ideal," she said. "We are all a part of something, and we can't work apart from it. We're similar to humans in that way. You have to set boundaries on what you can and cannot do."

"But dreamers don't think like that," I argued.

"Or rather, they are in denial," she countered. "Reality is merciless. No matter how far you travel or what you can do, you can never be greater than what you truly are. Just like that story of the Monkey King that carved his name on Buddha's palm."

"But it's not something everyone can accept readily," I said.

"And so, what would you do if you were such a god?" she asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Masaki would have answered in a second," she said.

"What's the answer?" I asked.

"Think," she replied.

"Give me a hint," I pleaded.

"Why should I when you haven't even tried?" Shiro-sama said with a smirk. It was one of those irritating smirks people made when they knew that you couldn't do any better.

"You're asking for it again!" I shouted.

"So you're resorting to violence? Fitting," she said.

I swung my arm up in anger.

"Think like a human, child," she said as she swiftly dodged my uppercut.

"Huh?" I asked.

She swiftly jumped onto Shiromaru's back.

"Think for yourself, Sergeant." And with that, Shiromaru jumped into the nearest Yashiro.

In a flash of white light, they were gone.

"Think like a human." I muttered to myself.

What did she mean by that?

My mind was jumbled, but I did understand one thing.

She didn't want me to think like an individual human, but like the way humans do collectively.

A thin gust of wind swirled around my feet. I suddenly realized that I had been standing there so long I had chilled to the bone.

I began walking to warm my stiff body.

Masaki-san would have given the answer straight away?

I realized what Shiro-sama had done.

"Dammit!" I exclaimed.

She had purposely brought out Masaki-san's name just so I wouldn't go running to him for help.

She wanted me to think for myself, and had played on my pride.

"Oooh I'm getting mad now!" Private Shiro was putting her Sergeant to the test.

It would be easy to make one phone call to Masaki-san, but I couldn't do that.

I'd figure it out myself.

Maybe it was because I was being so hot headed, but the cold didn't bother me anymore as I marched through the snow.

"I'll show her!" I said as I picked up my pace.

First, I would make myself feel better. Back home I would have a warm kotatsu to climb into, with yummy oranges and Madoi to cuddle.

Later that night, the weight of Shiro-sama's words had dulled into fatigue. I stared into the mirror, noting how shabby I looked.

I had my toothbrush hanging from my lips, its handle sticking out like a cigarette with the corners of my mouth still covered in white froth.

It's not that I wasn't getting enough sleep lately, I just couldn't sleep well with something on my mind

I noticed my skin was looking poor too.

I made a mental note to ask Sanae for some recommendations on moisturizer.

Then, the sound of water.

"Huh?" I muttered.

"Madoi is done," he announced, looking up at me with his cup and toothbrush in hand. From the way he stood, it seemed he had been waiting for the right moment to speak.

"Open your mouth," I said, baring all my teeth in demonstration.

Madoi imitated me.

"Not good enough," I snatched his toothbrush away.

"Madoi tried super hard!" he insisted.

"It won't matter how hard you try if you still have dirty teeth." I squeezed some apple mint flavored toothpaste onto his toothbrush. "Open up."

"Eew..." he groaned.

He tried resisting, but in the end he gave up and did as he was told.

He was pretty obedient to his elders.

I wasn't a dentist, but I still had to do my best to take care of his dental hygiene.

I'm Madoi's nene-sama now.

I didn't have a clue as to what Madoi had eaten in the past, but his teeth were sparkling white.

"Rinse your mouth," I instructed.

"You're treating Madoi like a baby!" he complained.

"You are a baby," I countered.

We rinsed and spat together.

"Madoi's mouth feels cold."

"Minty is the word for the sensation. Uh... Aaaaaaugh." I opened my mouth wide to make an epic yawn. I was getting sleepy.

I went back to my room. I wanted to fall face down on the large bed and just sleep.

"I've got to check my route for tomorrow," I reminded myself.

On my desk I had my map spread out. I bent over it to decide which areas to search next.

"Although there isn't much left to cover," I muttered. The larger part of the map was covered in red stamps now.

"I'd better go to bed," I sighed.

I noticed I was talking to myself a lot lately, but I couldn't care with my groggy mind.

I got into bed and burrowed under the sheets.

"Goodnight," I said as I lay on my back.

I was about to fall asleep, when...

"Um..." Madoi squeaked.

"Alright, come here," I said.

Madoi was sleeping on my bed too, under a different blanket.

He looked at me hopefully, and I caved.

I turned to him and lifted the corner of my futon. He made his way over with exaggerated movements and snuggled up close beside me.

I knew I was sweet on him.

"You're warm," he said with a smile.

"Your body temperature rises just before you fall asleep," I explained automatically. Teaching him things had become second nature to me now.

"But I have to say, if you think that you can make me do whatever you want by making Bambi eyes..." I warned.

He stared back at me innocently from beneath his long eyelashes.

"... You're absolutely right," I admitted with a chuckle.

I didn't think there was a single girl in this world that could reject Madoi.

He was a lady killer of a different sort compared to Masaki-san.

"You mutter a lot. Who are you talking to?" he asked.

"I'm talking to the world," I replied.

"Mizuho Nene-sama says difficult things sometimes," he said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes you need to distance yourself from things that are too simple," I explained.

"You talk like Masaki-san," he observed.

I had to admit, Masaki-san's mannerisms rubbed off on the people around him.

"You're cold." I said as I stroked Madoi's back.

"I was in the snow for a very long time," he murmured. His words reached my heart before they reached my ears. "So it feels good to be warm again."

He hugged me tightly.

"What was your Nene-sama like?" I asked.

"She was over heated," he answered cryptically.

I hadn't a clue what he meant by that.

"I may be your Mizuho Nene-sama, but I'm not your real Nene-sama," I said softly, holding him closer. "The only thing I can do is run around town without a clue of what I'm doing. The real Nene-sama would have been able to help you in a flash."

"That's not..." he began.

"...Just the way Onii-chan would," I interrupted. "Although I did hit him pretty hard with that conditioner bottle the other day."

I grinned at him, just a little.

"He's a dumb pervert and can be pretty dense when it comes to Sanae, but he would always come running when I needed him. If I really were in trouble, I know he'd pull me out of it no matter what."

"I won't let Nene-sama be in trouble either!" Madoi said hotly. I smiled at his chivalry.

"But I don't know if I can be that for you. Because at the end of the day I'm not your Nene-sama, and I feel like I need to prove myself by being able to provide you with, at the very least, what you need. Unfortunately, I'm failing miserably."

Oh no, I was beginning to feel like a disappointment again.

"I guess..." To my surprise, Madoi nodded as if he understood. "You may not be able to give me what I want, but even still..."

"Hrmm?"

"You make me happy." He stared at me earnestly from his pillow.

"Please understand..."

Please know. You can save somebody with a mere thought. The results don't matter much, because you've given me something so much more.

He was being simple like the child that he was.

I thought I understood now, how people felt when they left a note in the confession box in church.

"I don't wish for anything more."

"Come here."

"Hmmm?"

"Let your fake Nene-sama do this for you, at least."

I hugged him tighter in an attempt to take the rest of the cold away.

"You're so warm."

I hoped he was saying the truth.

I hoped I was doing the right thing.

We fell asleep together, the way siblings would.

Woah!

We all sat listening to the continuous tapping of chalk on the blackboard.

Usually it would lull me to sleep, but not today.

"The rest of the town will be finished soon," I muttered.

The phrase itself would sound extremely sinister if I had said it at the town council, but I was talking about my map.

I stared at the white page of my blank notebook. (Ignore the problem that it's blank, if you please.)

"It's all red," I muttered again.

The phrase itself would be a big problem if I were a merchant, but of course I was referring to the stamps.

On the fourth day of my search, I had finally covered the whole of Tagami town.

Yes, my mission to find something that contained a god's power had poor prospects to begin with, but it was still my only hope.

Madoi had tagged along with Sanae to her cooking class, so he wasn't here with me.

I should have scolded him for running off like that, but in truth I needed some time to myself so I could gather my thoughts.

I felt the map underneath my jacket as I continued to stare at my blank notebook.

I remembered someone mentioning that white panties were sacred to young men. I wondered whether it was something I should write a thesis on.

In other words, I was thinking up the most ridiculous things as a way to distract myself from facing the real problem.

I looked up at the blackboard. It was covered with notes about the French Revolution. I didn't feel motivated enough to take them down.

I made a mental note to borrow Uesugi's notebook later. She was a fiend when it came to finances, but she was generally the type that couldn't refuse if someone depended on her.

I picked up my mechanical pencil.

"What is being human?" I penned. It was a question with a billion answers.

I glared at what I had just written.

I had thought about this for three whole days after my talk with Shiro-sama.

Our Tochigami had mentioned that some gods did not want to be what they were.

They wanted to be something else. They craved change, despite knowing it was impossible.

Just the way humans do.

"So gods think like humans too?"

Humans as a whole, not as an individual.

Though, what did being human mean anyway?

My eyes darted around the classroom.

There were the classmates that I spoke with frequently, and the classmates that I didn't talk to at all, and then there was the history teacher that had no connection to me whatsoever except that he talked about history in the class I sat in every week.

There were so many people.

Was I supposed to erase their individuality from my mind when I thought about this problem? But if I did that, would they even be human anymore?

I didn't like the way I was thinking.

"If the earth had only a hundred people..." I thought idly. Then I decided to pay attention in class for once (again, kindly ignore the problem in my statement).

"So we've covered the events from Bastille to the Declaration of Human Rights," the teacher said "The revolt may have begun from mundane problems such as not having enough to eat, but it grew into a revolution for the common people to fight against the upper classes for equal rights. Of course, there were things that were left unchanged..."

I opened my textbook. There was a picture of a man holding a flag pointing towards one direction, and there were many that followed him... No, that wasn't quite right. They looked to be under his command.

In a situation like that, it was hard to think of the people as individual human beings.

"Whether it may be the need for food, money, or anything at all," the teacher continued "We as humans have not changed much, at least in the context that we fight to gain what we lack."

I nodded at the teacher's words.

The school bell rang. It was lunch hour.

By the time we sat down to eat, the tension from earlier had thinned out, lingering only as an unspoken weight between bites.

Masaki-san was trying to escape Yuki's 'Say Ah-' routine by bringing his own bread, although it didn't seem like he was having much success. We were laughing at his feeble attempts, just as usual.

"Where's Sanae?" Onii-chan asked as he looked around the room. He hadn't even touched his lunch yet. He was strangely polite in ways like that.

I, on the other hand, had already finished most of what was in my bento box.

"Probably still baking cookies in cooking class." Masaki answered.

"How do you know the girls are baking cookies?"

"Yuki gave me some a couple of days ago. We're in the same grade, so the curriculum has to be the same."

"I put extra effort into those," Yuki said eagerly. "How were they?"

"Well, I left them on the dining table to eat later, and by the time I got back mom had eaten them all."

"Oh, Mami-chan..." Yuki groaned.

"She left a message for you too. She said: It wasn't bad kid, next time I want chocolate cookies, thanks. Buuurp!"

Yuki facepalmed. Mami-chan, Masaki-san's mother, was quite a character.

"Maybe she's taking time because there are only so many ovens... oh, there she is."

"Did I keep you waiting?" Sanae said as she slid into her chair.

Now we were all together-

"-Not."

"Mizuho?"

"Where's Madoi?" I asked.

He should have been with her.

"Oh," Sanae turned towards the door. It was wide open and we could hear the excited whispers from the corridor.

"Hmm?" I heard Madoi murmur.

"Come on in, don't be shy!" Sanae encouraged.

"Um, umm..." Madoi poked his head around the door, but stayed where he was.

"Madoi, what's wrong?" I asked.

"Promise you won't laugh?" he said nervously.

"Uh, okay?" I replied.

Madoi walked in slowly.

I froze in my seat.

So did Onii-chan.

"UUrrfff," Masaki-san was being force fed like a foie gras duck.

"We all thought he was cute," Sanae said with a mischievous grin.

"S-Sanae-sama said I had to wear this if I wanted cookies..." Madoi looked shy, pulling at the hem of his shirt.

"Initially we wanted to put him into uniform," Sanae explained, "but this was all we had."

Madoi was wearing the school's official PE gear. Only, it was for girls. And he was in bloomers.

The entire classroom fell silent as all eyes were on him.

"U-uh, um..." Madoi shrank behind me. "H-how do I look?"

"How you look? Well..."

"Hey Masaki." Onii-chan spoke up before I could think of an answer.

"What is it Kouhei?"

"What am I supposed to do with the feels I have right now?"

Masaki-san looked baffled, and tried to come up with an answer to Onii-chan's weird question.

He failed.

Onii-chan turned towards us. I could hear Madoi squeak in fear behind me.

"You're scaring him," I warned.

"Madoi," Onii-chan said firmly.

"Y-yes?" Madoi squeaked.

"I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE A BOY!!" Onii-chan shouted.

He slammed his chopsticks down and pounced.

"Nene-sama, help!" Madoi cried. "Kouhei-sama's acting weird!!"

"Marry me!" Onii-chan yelled. "There may be some difficulties ahead, but we'll figure something out!"

Onii-chan was descending on us, taking a huge leap (from his sexuality as well) across our desks...

"NOOOOOOO!!!!!"

"OOF!?"

...but was intercepted by Sanae's iron claw.

"GRRRRRRRR!!!!!"

"OW OW OW OW OW! My head! It feels like it's in a vice!!" Onii-chan wailed.

"You pedophile! Cheat! Scumbag!!" Sanae shouted, tightening her grip.

"Uh, Sanae!? Kouhei's tapping your arm already, he's admitting defeat! Let him go! He's turning blue!!" Masaki-san's pleading for his friend's life didn't work.

"Kouhei, you idiot!" Sanae grabbed Onii-chan's waist.

He wasn't even screaming anymore, he was in fact quite limp.

Just as he was about to regain consciousness...

"Take that!!!" Sanae tossed him over her head in a suplex.

For the second time today, I saw Onii-chan's body sail through the air. Except this time he landed on his head, straight as an arrow.

Everyone flinched and averted their eyes.

"Show some self restraint! Jeez!!" Sanae scolded.

"That probably wasn't the biggest problem in his outburst, but oh well..." Somebody muttered.

I looked at Onii-chan again. He was still stuck head down where he landed, stiff as a pole.

He had hit a desk, penetrating the top wooden surface down to the metal drawer underneath, which was now bent to the shape of his head.

I tried to pretend he was some sort of neo-artistic Ikebana stuck in a vase, but the way he occasionally swayed a little made it disconcerting.

"M-Mizuho Nene-sama," Madoi whispered, still behind me.

"Uh, don't worry, you're safe now," I reassured him.

Well that settled everything.

"Don't tell me you were attracted like Kouhei was," Yuki asked, glaring at Masaki-san

"I've always thought Madoi had a more androgynous look," Masaki-san replied cautiously.

With a naginata near his throat, anybody would have tried to be diplomatic.

"Well that was a waste of time. Here, have a seat." I said as I made room for Madoi on my chair and he sat between my legs.

"May I have an orange?" he asked timidly.

"You have to eat your spinach first," I said, handing him the box.
"Hey..."

"Nene-sama?"

Something crossed my mind. I quickly gave some instructions to Madoi.

He tilted his head sideways quizzically, but did as I asked. He called me...

".....Onee-sama?"

"WHOA!!!"

Critical hit!! Mizuho receives super damage to her heart! Status condition: "Charmed"!

"Oh you bad, bad girl..." I murmured to myself, grabbing Madoi's chin with my thumb and forefinger. I swiveled his head around to face me.

"Uh, Onee-sama?" he said nervously.

"There you go enticing everybody in public like that," I scolded playfully. "I'll have to punish you for being such a temptress..."

"Um, um, what's happened to you Nene-sama?" Madoi stammered.
"You're acting different; you're usually a lot more crass. And why are you looking at me like that!?"

"Ooooh things are heating up here!" Sanae commented excitedly.

Masaki-san leaned forward in his chair slightly in anticipation.

"Now we shall indulge in sin..." I declared dramatically.

"You can't...do...that...!" Madoi whispered.

"Huh?" I blinked. For a moment I thought he had disappeared.

I felt him slip away from my grasp.

"Madoi!" Yuki was the first to react.

Madoi had slid down from the chair and was lying unconscious on the floor.

Unconscious.

Unconscious?

But he was completely fine just now, we were just kidding around...

"Let's carry him to the sick bay," Masaki said quickly.

Liar

The evenings are short in winter, I observed as I looked out the window.

I had been so long in the sick bay, I was immune to the smell of rubbing alcohol by now.

I watched the last streaks of red fade from the sky. There was a kettle steaming softly in the background. it was there to humidify the room.

Madoi was fast asleep on the bed. It was about an hour ago that his breathing finally steadied.

He looked in pain as he slept, and I couldn't bear to watch him like that. And so, I had looked out the window most of the time. That's why I knew how the colors turned in the sky.

I wouldn't have noticed at all in my usual mindset.

There it was again, the border of awareness and ignorance. It all depended on where your consciousness lay.

"I really am starting to sound like Masaki-san." I muttered to myself.

I was waxing philosophical, the way he did. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

The nurse in charge had gone for a break and hadn't returned yet.

She said Madoi was deteriorating.

Deteriorating.

That word stayed with me like a curse.

A couple walked past outside, hand in hand. The window framed them like a picture, the fading sunset their perfect backdrop.

It was almost past six now.



"Mmm..."

"Madoi?" I whispered.

"Nene... sama... is that you...?" His voice was drowsy, but I heard him clearly.

"Mizuho Nene-sama's right here."

He was speaking drowsily, but I could hear him clearly.

"How are you feeling?" I asked gently.

"I think... I can get up..." He fumbled around under the blanket.

"No, stay where you are." I leaned forward, firm. There was no way he'd be able to walk home.

"You had me worried there when you fainted like that."

"You were here... You stayed by my side," he murmured.

"That again? I'm always here for you."

"Toto-sama and Kaka-sama didn't."

"They were too busy dreaming."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I shook my head, expressing I didn't understand either.

"It's what Shiro-sama told me. Do you have any clue what that means?"

The room was heated to the point of suffocation.

"What caused you to faint in the classroom?" I pressed.

Madoi stayed silent.

"Is it because you haven't found your powers?"

"That's not true!" he yelled.

It was a lie that wouldn't even convince a baby.

"I'm so sorry, Madoi."

So much for the Mizuho Touyama Adventure Squad.

I had achieved nothing.

I had found nothing.

Nothing.

I thought Madoi was being lazy when he didn't come out to help in the search.

I didn't notice the reason was he was getting weak.

I looked at the clock. I still had some time.

I called Onii-chan's cellphone.

"Touyama?"

"Masaki-san?"

That was unexpected. He explained that Onii-chan was a bit busy now, so he picked up instead.

"Madoi needs someone to pick him up?" It wasn't a question, it was a confirmation.

I was grateful that he caught on to the situation so quickly.

"Yes please."

"And you?"

"I'm going to Sakashima."

"What about Madoi?"

"Please!" I ground out.

It was a painful question that I didn't want to answer, but he asked it again.

"What about Madoi?"

I hung up.

The longer I stayed here, the less time Madoi had left.

I had to go out and find Madoi's power and return it to him to save him.

I reached for my bag nearby.

"Madoi, I'm sorry, but..."

"Are you leaving me alone?" Madoi asked angrily. "You said you'd stay with me. That you'll be here when I need you."

"I did, but..."

"You're the same as Toto-sama!"

"No I'm not! I'm going to save you!!"

I knew I shouldn't be yelling at him, but I couldn't help it. I was too worked up now.

I knew I was making excuses, but I couldn't stop.

"What will happen if you lose all of your power?"

Madoi stayed silent.

"Tell me!" I demanded.

"I'll die, just like everybody else," His words fell heavy in the air.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

"Masaki-san should be here soon. He'll take care of you."

I grabbed my bag.

"You can be angry with me now, but I'm going to save you."

I ran out of the sick bay without looking back.

Last try

I didn't find anything.

"It's starting to snow..." I murmured.

I ran toward Sakashima station with a plastic bag filled with sweets and cookies swinging on my arm.

Because this region snowed so heavily, the trains stopped running frequently in winter.

I managed to catch the last train heading to Tagami before it left.

"Huh." I let out a tired breath.

I felt bitter. Despite running out like that, declaring I would fix everything, I had accomplished nothing yet again.

I was the only passenger in the cabin. The train chugged on, rocking steadily, inviting me to sleep. I mentally shook myself awake and pulled the plastic bag I was carrying up my arms.

Tagami station was only one stop away. Once I got off the train, I still had to make my way home.

What was I doing? I had left in an angry fit and was coming back with a bagful of treats to apologize.

"Huh." I sighed again.

The train slowly came to a stop and I stood up to get off.

As I walked out, I could hear the hazard announcement echo hollowly through the empty station. They weren't going to run the trains anymore today.

I sprinted back home, only to find worried looks on everyone's faces.

"A regular thermometer won't work," Masaki-san said as he looked at the digital in his hand. It read 45 degrees Celsius. Somebody was panting heavily.

My mind went blank. Whose temperature was that? Who was panting?

"It happened pretty suddenly," Onii-chan said. Masaki-san nodded in agreement.

I hated the way they were so calm.

I dropped the bag of treats I was carrying. Everything scattered onto the floor.



"I didn't find anything," I sighed.

I made my way to Madoi on shaky legs.

I almost collapsed by his pillow.

"Madoi?" I called softly.

"Nene... sama..." He responded, but I couldn't tell if he was talking in his sleep or if he actually heard me.

I took off the towel he had on his forehead to rinse it.

"It's so hot," I muttered.

The towel wasn't just warm. It was impossibly hot, having absorbed Madoi's body heat. I rinsed the towel in water and wrung it dry.

The water was icy cold, cutting me to the bone. Even so, the feeling of Madoi's heat still lingered in my hand.

"I couldn't do anything," and still couldn't do anything, even now.

I couldn't give him anything, I couldn't help. I couldn't even make him feel better from the state he was in.

"I'll call a doctor," Onii-chan said, but as he said it, it was obvious he knew it was meaningless.

What doctor could examine a god? There wasn't enough time to test if human medical procedures would even work. I could have called one long ago.

"Again," I whispered hoarsely. Only Masaki-san noticed.

I had no solution.

I couldn't think of anything. My usual, useless excuses.

"I failed again." I whispered.

"Mizuho..." Onii-chan said gently.

I just wanted to help, and now things had turned a lot more serious than I thought.

I hated it.

Madoi was going to die if I didn't find a solution quickly.

"Why did this happen?"

I must have sounded horrible. I could hear Onii-chan suck in a breath.

"What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," Masaki-san answered simply.

"Then why-"

"You tried your best, but it didn't work out," Masaki-san said. "You didn't do anything wrong, Mizuho. This is happening for a different reason."

"Screw that!" I yelled through tears.

What did being right mean if it didn't fix anything?

"Tagami is poison to Madoi," Masaki-san said gravely.

"Because he's a god from somewhere else?"

"Yes. For him, it's an alien environment."

"But... why is it poisoning him?"

"Do you remember why it was possible for Madoi to cross the boundary between Sakashima and Tagami?"

"Because-"

I remembered.

"Shiro-sama wasn't paying attention. Her powers were weak."

She was too busy eating and having fun in the New Year to bother taking notice of the boundary surrounding her territory.

"She's regained control," Masaki-san explained. "Now the land is on full alert."

So, Madoi..." I whispered.

"Is considered an enemy to our land. A trespasser that must be destroyed."

"I didn't know..." I murmured.

"Knowledge is power," Masaki-san said firmly.

Masaki-san was right. The weight of his words crushed me.

"What can I do?"

I wasn't being hopeful, I was desperate.

"Bring him back to Sakashima," Masaki-san replied.

I looked up at him. He smiled back at me, seemingly pleased that I had asked.

"If you return him to where he belongs, he should be able to recover."

"Then we should..."

"-But it's too late now," Masaki-san said wistfully. He was watching Madoi.

I turned my eyes to Madoi as well.

"His breath..."

"He might not make the journey back home," Masaki-san said quietly.

Madoi's panting had subsided, and now he was barely breathing anymore.

I felt my strength leave me.

The color on his cheeks and the way his thin chest rose almost unnoticeably were my only reassurances that he was still alive.

Madoi was dying. We were running out of time.

"W-w-we can use the train..." -And then I remembered the hazard announcement.

No trains were running.

My mind went blank, and then it filled with rage.

"Why didn't you save him!?" I shouted.

I grabbed Masaki-san's shoulders with all my might. His face contorted in pain for a moment. My fingers dug into his shoulders till I could feel his bones.

"Because this is what Madoi wanted." He said bitterly, his face twisting into a different kind of hurt.

His words hit me like a sledgehammer.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He wanted you, Mizuho," he said, the words falling heavy between us.

"He said that if there was a chance that he was going to die, he would rather wait for you to come home." He said, clutching my elbows.

"That's right, Mizuho," Kouhei added. "All he wanted was you by his side."

I felt the anger drain away, leaving me empty.

At the school's sickbay, Madoi had asked if I was going to leave him.

I had believed I was doing everything for his own good, but what I had done was abandon him when he needed me the most.

What I believed to be the right thing to do was the wrong thing for him.

I felt strangled. I began to gulp and take large amounts of air into my lungs.

I wasn't thinking straight. Everything was jumbled in my brain. I began to think this was the end.

However, I couldn't give up just yet.

"Private Masaki!" I began. "What's the solution to this situation?"

"Like I said, to bring Madoi back to Sakashima. He should recover in time so long as he's there," He replied.

I nodded. That much I could understand.

If Madoi didn't have enough strength, we had to find a way to give some to him. Simple as that.

"And what are my best chances of keeping him alive?" I asked, the words catching in my throat.

"To take him as close to the borders of Sakashima as possible," he replied "And as soon as possible."

"Alright." I said firmly.

I was stupid. I've always done better moving than thinking.

So, I'd move.

But this time, I wasn't going to leave Madoi behind.

"You know what I'm going to do, don't you?"

"Are you giving me an order?" Masaki-san smiled.

"Come with me, Private Masaki." I said as I lifted Madoi up in my arms. His body was unbelievably light and warm.

"Where to?"

"Ookami mountain." I declared.

It was the final expedition of the Adventure Squad.

The Sound of Bells

It was around 22:00, and we were climbing the snowy mountain.

For the past few days, We've had terrible weather.

The wind was so strong, I was afraid it would whisk me and Madoi away.

My throat had gone dry and sore, but I couldn't afford to stop.

"Touyama?" Masaki-san looked back at me, concerned.

I just nodded at him to keep going.

So he moved forward again, stamping the snow down and making us a path.

"Thank you..." I murmured gratefully, although he couldn't hear me through the wind.

We reached a forked path.

"Turn left," I said.

"The shrine's to the right," Masaki-san said, looking confused.

Of course he remembered that the shrine was to the right. It was to the right. It was where we held the New Year's party.

"That's the wrong way," I was familiar with the mountains, having grown up here all my life. I knew going to Tagami shrine would lead us further away from the border of Sakashima. I had to bring Madoi closer to his land.

"I thought you wanted to find Shiro-sama," Masaki pressed.

"I do, but not that way."

"I'd like an explanation."

"There's no time for that!" I shouted. Masaki-san didn't question me further, but turned left up the mountain path.



I had walked for so long, my legs were beginning to shake. I was battling fatigue. If I fell down, I didn't think I would have the energy to get back up.

Thankfully Madoi was so light, he was hardly a burden.

I could feel his warm breath brush against my ear.

"Madoi," I whispered.

"Nene, sama..." he breathed.

"I'm here, stay with me." I wanted to say so much more, I wanted to keep talking, but I didn't think it would be wise to use energy moving my mouth when I scarcely had enough to move my legs. He was so close, yet I couldn't reach him. Maybe if I made more effort. Maybe...

I felt so useless, but at the same time his presence gave me strength.

Madoi's words were broken, but his whispers were gradually getting clearer. I realized we were nearing the border, so he was gaining his strength back.

For the first, I felt hope in the situation we were in.

I could hear the ringing again.

"Bells..." I muttered.

"We're nearing the Boundary," Masaki-san said.

I could tell he was beat too.

He had been pushing his way through the snow, making us a path since we entered the mountains.

The bells.

With each step, the bells grew louder and more numerous.

They weren't pleasant on the ears.

They sounded hostile, like a warning to ward me off.

".....sama," Madoi whispered.

"I'm here," I answered.

"Madoi... has failed you..."

I realized he wasn't talking to me, but he was talking to himself, delirious."

"Toto-sama... I'm not alone anymore... so I thought I would succeed... but... our promise..."

I could hear the regret in his voice.

He was talking to his father long gone.

"Toto-sama... forgive me... Madoi won't... won't..."

The bells rang louder than ever.

I trudged on.

My throat was constricting, and I gasped for air.

But I didn't care about that anymore.

Think! Think like a human!

The French revolution.

Things that don't change.

I have to hurry.

"Hurry."

Another step, and then another, and another.

And then...

"Here we are." Masaki-san said, coming to a halt.

I walked up to stand beside him.

I felt the pebbles beneath my feet. There was no snow where I stood.

"I'm glad you made it, Adventure Squad," Shiro smiled.

"I knew you'd be here," I replied.

We were standing on a squarish platform made of stone, as if someone had cut a hole in the sky.

No snow fell on the stones, only around them.

The bells rang continuously.

They were holy, purifying, intimidating.

They were not pleasant to the ears of man, for man was filled with sin.

"Don't!" Madoi protested.

"What's the matter?" Shiro asked. "It's not like you've never been here before."

"You knew from the start," I accused.

"Of course." the god of Tagami laughed.

The Boundary

"I thought like a human, just like you told me to," I said.

"And?" Shiro-sama prompted.

"I figured you knew Madoi's father."

"Why?"

"Because he probably tried to kill you."

I felt Madoi react, clutching onto me tighter.

"And why did you think so?" Shiro asked amusedly.

"Because of the way history repeats itself."

"What history might that be?"

"A history of conflict, war, and invasion."

It wasn't peace that brought progress to mankind.

"If people wanted something, they always fought for it."

They may have fought for food or human rights, it could be for anything.

"The god of Sakashima dreamed of being the Almighty," I continued.

"If he knew he couldn't achieve that alone, the next step was to find a way to change that. To find a method that would bring him closer to his ideal. He needed to expand his power as much as possible. That's when he decided to invade Tagami and take your power."

"And you figured that out yourself, Mizuho?" she asked.

She wasn't calling me 'girl' now.

"Madoi said he would 'regain his power'. That meant it was taken away."

"So you pretty much got the answer from him."

"So I'm right?"

"Indeed. Madoi's father tried to kill me."

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

"Shiromaru ate him, of course."

The wolf by her side flashed its golden eyes at us.

"Simply by being here, a Tochigami from another land would be poisoned" Shiro-sama explained. "So I played tag with him, ran about and had him chasing me around till he was tired. I knew he would weaken to the point where he had to cross the boundary back to Sakashima, so I waited for my chance to kill him then."

"That means..." I murmured.

"He died here, right at this spot."

"Toto-sama..." Madoi whispered.

"I suppose it was unbearable to watch a loved one being eaten alive," Shiro-sama went on, "so his wife crossed the boundary in an attempt to save his life."

It was easy to imagine what happened after that.

"Why?" Shiro-sama tossed her head. "Why should I forgive them? He was the one who broke the rules. He was an idiot, greedy for powers

beyond his capabilities. Who knows what he would have done if nobody had stopped him here?"

"Toto-sama, Kaka-sama..." Madoi mouthed dazedly.

He didn't cry, he was too confused at the turn of events to understand, but I could sense his hurt.

I could feel the rage bubbling up inside of me. It would have been easy for me to simply yell and vent my anger at Shiro-sama, but I restrained myself.

I looked around. What would Masaki-san do now if he were in my shoes?

"Alright, enough of history!" I said sharply. "Although I have many questions to ask, my priority right now is saving Madoi's life. Where is his power?"

"I've got it right here," Shiro-sama replied.

"I don't see anything."

"Power is authority. That's not something visible like a solid, is it?... However, I suppose I can make it visible for you if you wish." She opened her palm upwards and formed a ball of white light above it.

"Consider this something like a police badge," she added, "when the police force need to project their authority on the spot."

"You sure are well informed in our human ways..." I muttered, but I wasn't really paying attention to the conversation.

I was mesmerized by the ball of light in her hand.

"Can you give that back to him?"

"No." Her mouth curved upwards, making her pointy canines poke out from between her lips.

"Please?"

"Why should I give back something I rightfully won?"

"I'll give you Masaki-san for it."

"Hey! Don't pimp me off like that!" Masaki-san protested.

"Besides," Shiro-sama added, "I would prefer to win him over myself."

"Could you both stop objectifying me!?" Masaki-san whined.

We both ignored him.

"Then... I'll have to behave just the way humans would," I said.

"You're going to try and take it away from me by force?" Shiro-sama asked, amused.

"I don't have any other choice."

"And how will you do that? You are aware that I'm a god, aren't you?"

"Uh..." I hadn't thought of that yet. "...Can you go easy on me?"

"After all that steam, that's the best you could come up with?"

"W-w-well, I'm just a normal human being! I'm not some legendary god that can fight you!"

"Isn't this the part where you're supposed to prove your worth and think of a way to outwit me?" Shiro-sama gave an exaggerated sigh.

"Oh, come!! You don't even need Sakashima's powers! Why do you want to hang on to it so bad?"

"And you don't 'need' your second kidney."

"Fair point." I didn't like where that conversation was going.

".....Think of this as a game," Masaki-san suggested suddenly.

"Shiro-sama, why did you keep it secret from Touyama all this time?" he asked. "Watching her struggle to find out the truth?"

"Because it was fun!" Shiro-sama said brightly. "It was so entertaining to watch."

"Madoi's suffering was... entertaining to you?" I asked, my voice trembling.

I was starting to see red. Not only was I angry at Shiro-sama for toying with me and Madoi, but I was just as angry at Masaki-san for keeping what he'd noticed from me too.

"Then, why don't you take this challenge as a form of entertainment?" Masaki-san continued. "A game with Madoi's powers as the prize." Masaki-san continued.

"Oh, alright Masaki. If you say so." Shiro turned to me. "Mizuho."

"Y-yes?"

"Hurry up and decide what you want to challenge me at."

"Uh..."

"Be grateful that I'm actually giving you a chance."

Things were moving too fast. I never thought she would give it up for nothing, but I was hoping I could persuade her by handing Masaki-

san over (Ignore the fact that I am stripping him of his human rights).

I was going to fight for Madoi's life? What odds did I face?

"Hurry up," she warned. "Madoi will die anyway if you take too much time making up your mind."

"I know that!"

"Well, if glaring daggers at me is going to help your brain, glare all you want." She chuckled.

I hated the way she laughed so easily.

But she was right, we were running out of time. In other words, I had to pick something that would give results quickly.

Something physical? Nope, no prospect of winning there.

Something academic? Nope, that's even worse.

"Have you decided yet?"

"Wait!"

I was running out of options.

"Private Masaki," I said, "do you have any advice for me?"

"You probably won't win if you try to play fair," he said.

"Gee, thanks."

I could tell Masaki-san was thinking too, but from the way he replied, he was having trouble thinking of something just as much as I was. I was irritated by his vague answer, but who was I to complain when I couldn't think of anything myself?

I couldn't think of a way to win? Then, why not try to win without thinking at all...?

"I've decided!"

"What'll it be?" Shiro-sama asked.

I stuck my fist out at her.

"Oho, you want to fight me?"

"No."

"You don't want to punch me?"

I shook my head, and said out loud and clear:

"Rock paper scissors!"

Shiro-sama blinked.

"Mizuho... do you realize what you're saying?"

"I've got a 33% chance of winning."

"And a 33% chance of losing too."

"This will be quick. Only one chance."

"Wait! Don't you have a better idea!?" Shiro-sama yelped.

"I don't think there's any chance of me winning unless it's a luck based match."

Shiro-sama rubbed her temples as if she were in pain. I didn't think it was such a bad idea.

".....Oh, never mind. I did give my word after all. Come, let's do it."

"Can you take care of Madoi for me for a moment?" I lifted a shoulder at Masaki-san.

"I can stand by myself," Madoi said.

"No, don't waste your energy."

"It's okay."

Before I could answer, Madoi slid off my back to the ground.

He was a bit shaky on his feet, but he managed to stand on his own.

"I'm okay. We're close to the border."

"So I just have to win now."

"Yeah," Madoi nodded "And I want to watch you when you do it."

I nodded. I'm gonna win, I psyched myself up.

"Let's begin."

"Alright." Shiro-sama stuck her small fist out.

"W-wait!"

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

"Don't look!!" I clasped my hands, twisted my arms above my head, and peaked through the opening between my palms.

"...Masaki," Shiro murmured, "I see small kids do that ritual all the time when they play rock paper scissors, but what does it mean?"

"I haven't a clue," he said.

"Hmm..."

Should I go for Rock? They say people use Rock often when they're nervous, and the god should know, so should I use scissors instead... No, she probably would guess my strategy I should go with paper to trick her but if I did that...

"You know, Madoi..."

"What?"

"I wasn't speaking to you Mizuho," Shiro-sama said dryly.

"Oh. Don't look!!" I yelped, peeking through my palms again. Should I go with paper? Yeah, definitely paper. No, wait...

"Humans are great fun, aren't they?" Shiro mused. "And Mizuho's even more fun than most."

"I like being with Nene-sama," Madoi said softly.

"Did you enjoy your time here?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"You're witnessing the freedom of men here."

"Alright!!" I spun around to face Shiro-sama. She turned to face me too.

"What were you two talking about?" I asked.

"I just asked whether he enjoyed his stay here," she replied casually.

"Don't use past tense!" I growled, "He's going to enjoy a whole lot more!"

"It's good that you're confident," she said, amused. "The way all people should be before a fight."

I stuck my fist out before me.

Shiro-sama did the same.

This was it.

"Rock,"

"Paper,"

And the sudden rush of anxiety hit me.

Maybe paper is better nah stick to the original plan do it simple Rock is good it's the fist of victory no no, I've got to re-think the way I think I don't wanna lose I don't wanna lose!!

"Scissors!!"

Rock.

Paper.

"Oh..." I breathed.

"Hmm," Shiro murmured.

She was the first to relax.

I still had my hand outstretched before me.

She looked at my hand and laughed.

I chose paper.

She had chosen rock.

"So I've lost," she said lightly.

I should be shouting with joy.

Instead, all of my muscles relaxed in relief, and I dropped to my knees.

"I... I won."

"Yup."

"Nene-sama..." Madoi's voice trembled behind me.

"Touyama, hurry," Masaki-san urged.

That's right. There were still things to do.

I took a deep breath to gather myself.

"Alright, now you've got to hold up your end of the bargain," I told Shiro.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked.

"Hurry!"

"If you say so."

The white ball of light floated above and beyond my head.

It dropped down and hovered in front of Madoi's chest before it was absorbed into his body.

That's it? I'd imagined something fancier.

"It's not supposed to be some kind of show," Shiro-sama looked a bit hurt at my obvious disappointment.

I booed her a bit for being uncreative. She looked unhappy.

I felt a lot better after having been toyed with for the past week.

"Oh..." Madoi placed both hands on his chest.

"Madoi?"

"So this is what the power of Sakashima feels like..." He murmured to himself, his eyes downcast.

He was standing with his feet planted firmly on the ground now.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Madoi's body is completely fine now."

"Oh, good..."

"But... why did you save me?" he asked suddenly, staring at me.

"Why did you return my powers to me?"

"Because... because that's what you came here for!" I insisted.

"I didn't wish it."

Every reasoning crumbled.

"Did Madoi look as if power was the most important thing to him?" he asked quietly.

"What are you saying..." I whispered.

He was always with me. The child that used to cry.

He ran around in the warehouse while I searched, took a bath with me at home, ate oranges, came with me to school-

Did he ever look for his power?

Not once.

I had just assumed. I made a search party, made maps, ran around town...

"Mizuho Nene-sama," he said gently, "Madoi doesn't think you knew what Madoi wished for the most."

"What are you saying? What you wished was..."

The reason why he stayed waiting at home, even when he was about to die was because of...

"Me?" I whispered.

A large tear rolled down his cheek.

Because he had me, he didn't want his powers anymore?

"But that's not right..." I was spouting whatever thought that leapt at me.

"Because, it was just by chance we went to Sakashima shrine that day," I said. "That was the first time I met you. At that point, you were talking about getting your powers back..."

"Madoi wanted to keep a promise with Toto-sama."

"Then, when did you change your mind?"

"When Madoi met Nene-sama."

Everything turned.

Everything that he had hoped for, for the past 100 years, had changed because of me?

I had turned his world upside down the moment I had met him?

"Madoi didn't need anything," he said. "Nene-sama, Masaki-sama, Kouhei-sama, Sanae-sama, Yuki-sama... All of you were so kind, Madoi was so happy. There was nothing more for me to wish for."

A simple wish from a lonely child with no family to turn to...

"Madoi didn't want Sakashima's powers anymore."

The past hundred years were a curse that "Mizuho Nene-sama" had lifted unwittingly.

"Nene-sama changed everything," He said.

When I left him alone, running around town, that was the last thing he wished for.

He knew he had limited time here, and I was wasting a good part of it on a wild goose chase.

"Why didn't you just say so?" I asked, voice cracking.

"I needed a reason for you to let Madoi stay."

"I didn't need a reason!" I wanted to shout.

Madoi was afraid. If he didn't have a purpose in Tagami, he feared he would be sent back to Sakashima, to live there alone again.

"Alright, but your powers are back now, so everything will be fine! Right?"

Even as I said so, I could hear my voice trembling, and I didn't know why.

"Madoi can't stay anymore," He whispered with a sad smile.

He said something else, but I couldn't hear him over the bells ringing around us.

However, I was able to read his lips.

"Why!?" I yelled before I even understood what was going on.

I stretched my arms out towards him.

"!?"

"Wha-...?"

In an instant, I was staring at the sky.

I could see millions of countless snowflakes falling, but magically avoiding us as if they slid down an invisible dome above us.

I wondered why my neck felt so relaxed. It didn't feel as strained as it should be if I was staring up to the heavens.

"Oh," Then it finally registered. My body was stretched out horizontally, because I had been tossed up into the air.

That's funny, just a moment ago I was facing forward.

My arms were stretched before me so I could hold Madoi...

"OW!!" I landed hard.

The impact blew my confusion away. I realized what had happened, I had reached out, but when I tried to touch him a force had sent me flying.

"Madoi!" I shouted.

I jumped up. Just as I was about to shout his name again, I saw it.



A white glowing wall stretched along the borders of Sakashima and Tagami.

It formed a boundary, a thick barrier that cut across the land, preventing anyone from crossing over.

I ran to it.

I punched it.

My hand didn't hurt.

It just felt so cold.

"No!" I pressed both hands against the wall, feeling the cold seep through my palms.

The bright white wall was keeping us apart.

"Madoi! Madoi!!!"

His silhouette wobbled and faded as the barrier grew whiter and stronger.

The bells had stopped. The intruder in this land had been sent back, never to cross these boundaries again.

The silence depicted peace.

"Madoi is the god of Sakashima now." Shiro-sama said with her eyes downcast. "Now that he has become a complete god, he is considered a threat to these lands."

"So he's caged in there forever?" I asked.

"Not 'caged', simply cut apart from us." Shiro-sama clarified.

"But I'm not a god!! I'm just a human! Why can't I go to the other side!?"

"Because you belong to Tagami." Masaki-san replied. "The boundary detects whether you're a part of Tagami or Sakashima and prevents, and it prevents crossing to the other side."

"Then get rid of it!"

"This wall takes its power from the land around it," Shiro-sama explained. "I don't command it, it works on it's own. I may be able to dissolve it temporarily, but that won't last long."

And that was that.

Just because I belonged to Tagami, and Madoi was Sakashima's god.

We were separated by a boundary with its own set of rules.

"No..." I whispered.

I recalled what Madoi said when I reached out to him.

"Goodbye."

Epilogue

By the end of January, there was excited talk about Valentines day coming up. Even the magazine I had spread out on my desk had reviews on chocolates and gifts for that special somebody.

"Uuuuuugh." I groaned as I turned the page.

I looked at the featured editorial peppered with stylish photographs. It had an interview with my favorite fashion model, Ao, but I couldn't motivate myself to read it.

The class was having an hour of self-study, but I didn't feel like doing anything at all.

"Uuuuuuuugh." I groaned as I placed my hands on my lap.

That special somebody wasn't there, and I missed the weight of him.

"You're completely useless now. Look at you!" Uesugi moaned.
"...Here, I'll do the documents."

It seemed that she was showing compassion for once, but I couldn't be sure.

I wasn't paying much attention.

"What's the matter with you?"

It was Sakura, from grandfather Tagami's.

"Oh, hai. Send my regards to your grandpa, please."

"You've been saying that for a week," she said flatly.

"Really?"

"Nevertheless, I have been relaying your messages every time. Here's one for you from him: 'Mizuho-san, not again!'"

"You make it sound as if I'm sick in the head or something."

"But, you are!" Sakura shot back.

I didn't say anything to that.

"So, what is it?" I asked.

"Nothing, I just thought to check on you because you looked depressed. Here, drink this."

"An energy drink?" I frowned. "You know, I've always wondered why, but these energy drinks are always colored so they look poisonous."

"Personally, the ingredients list was what put me off." Uesugi mumbled.

"Oh, don't mind that and use the pick-me-up, won't you?" Sakura insisted.

I had more questions, but I downed the drink anyway.

"Did I look that depressed to you?" I asked.

"You've been sighing nonstop for the past week."

"I'm touched that you care, but don't you have other stuff to attend to?"

"Oooh, touché. You sound like you're saying 'Don't bother me, eff off' but that's okay."

"Why?"

"I'm working on some Tagami Sakura Strategy," she said proudly, "that if I want Kouhei-san to notice me I'd better start befriending people around him and get close to you to a point where I can call you my step-sister and... oh, forget that I said that."

It sounded like she had pretty deep plans for manipulation going on, but I didn't care about that now.

"Is it about Madoi-chan?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Can't you at least look into my eyes when you deny it?"

".....Oh, alright. Fine. Yeah. It is about him."

"He looked really cute in a sailor skirt outfit," she added mischievously.

"When did you..!?" I sputtered.

"Our school council treasurer has been making quite a mint selling his pictures."

Moyori-san sure knew a thing about money, but again, I didn't care about that now.

"Oh, come on, cheer up! You've just been sitting there emanating dark forces from your seat all day."

"I can't."

"Don't say that! Well, what will make you happy?"

"Breaking that boundary." I mumbled.

"What?"

"I'm going to get some food." I got up from my seat and left the classroom.

Only Masaki-san was in the classroom when I went to the senior's floor. I was actually relieved.

"Where's everyone?"

"Sanae and Kouhei have gone to buy some stuff at the shop," he said. "Yuki was called to the principal's room. Baldy (the principal) is probably begging for another donation from Towada about now."

Masaki-san was reading a difficult looking book, seemingly engrossed. From the title, it looked like it was a study on some religious rites done on some remote islands.

"Where's your lunch?" I asked.

"I'm waiting on Yuki."

"You gigolo."

"Ouch!" He staggered a bit as if he'd just been stabbed in the chest.

I looked at the clock on the wall. Onii-chan and Sanae should probably be back in a few minutes.

I placed a finger on the book Masaki-san was reading and pressed it down, away from his face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Since when?" I countered with a question of my own.

"Since the first day at Sakashima shrine," Masaki-san said immediately. He knew exactly what I meant.

"But, I wasn't sure of it at that point. Not when we had just met him." He added.

"You had me curious," I said. "Neither you nor I knew about the change inside Madoi, or the history between the god of Sakashima and Shiro-sama. Which meant it was impossible for us to know Shiro-sama and Madoi were hiding the whereabouts of Sakashima's powers..."

Which meant, Madoi had already decided at that point when we met, and Shiro-sama was with me, to give up reclaiming Sakashima's powers to stay by my side.

"Oh."

"Touyama?" he asked gently.

"Nothing. I just pieced something together." I shook my head.
"Getting back to my question, when did you decide to play along with the two?"

"When we were at the warehouse," he said. "What gave me away?"

"Because you're usually excited about all things that have to do with gods, myths, and religion. But you weren't that eager to help out. And then you knew when Madoi needed help getting home, and you came up with a solution to regain his strength so fast. The more I thought about it, the more I suspected you knew something I didn't."

I was explaining myself as I thought it out, so I wasn't sure if I was choosing my words right.

"You knew too much, Masaki-san. Before I just didn't notice, but now I can see it. You were manipulating me the whole time so Madoi would get his wish."

"Yes." He admitted easily.

"You gave him time by refusing to help with the search. Then when Madoi got sick you told me what to do. Then you directed me to Shiro-sama. But what I don't understand is how you found out."

"After we went our separate ways that day after the warehouse, I went back," he said.

Then he had found papers about Madoi's father, and kept it a secret.

"So that's when I knew," he said. "Madoi didn't intend to look for his powers anymore, but needed you instead. I decided to be on his side."

"You... ugh."

I was surrounded by liars. Everyone knew except for me.

But I couldn't really be angry with him, because I knew he only did it to respect Madoi's wishes.

"But," He continued. "I never expected it to end this way."

"That wall... it isn't there when I look at it from afar, but when I get closer it appears," I said.

"It's probably because you've developed a special bond with Madoi," Masaki-san said. "Now that you're connected with the god of Sakashima more than anyone else, the barrier is probably extremely sensitive to you. I'm sorry."

"It not your fault, but..."

"But?" he prompted.

".....I want to see Madoi again," I whispered, "even if it's just one more time."

I covered my face with my hands. No matter how hard I tried not to cry, my eyes burned.

I was trying to keep this down. Trying to behave like a grown up, to accept and let go.

I turned into a hollow person with an attitude because it hurt so much.

But now I was just crying like a baby.

I said I would stay by his side. I made so many promises.

But I ignored his wishes, and I broke my promises.

I couldn't forgive myself.

"What would you do when you meet him?" Masaki-san asked quietly.

I lifted my face.

"Madoi has to stay in Sakashima. You have your life in Tagami. It would be difficult to be together. And now that Sakashima has its powers back, the boundaries are stronger than ever."

"But, Madoi's father made it across, didn't he?" I argued.

"I did say it would be difficult, but I didn't say it was impossible." Masaki-san said. "But what matters to you most isn't about the rules of power, but that you get to see him again, right?"

"Right." I nodded.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I..."

I couldn't stay with Madoi because he was the god of Sakashima now.

The god of turning. Sakashima's Tochigami.

I told Masaki-san what I thought.

He nodded and said that I was free to do whatever I pleased.

He took out his cellphone from his pocket to check the time.

"Kouhei has achieved item: potato sandwich!" he announced.

"Why are you talking like a video game?" Sanae asked. "I already told you, I'll make your lunch if you want!"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Masaki," Yuki said as she walked in. "Since you haven't bought any lunch for yourself, I assume that you were waiting for me to feed you hand to mouth."

"No, that's not what I was waiting for," Masaki-san said, standing up. "Everyone, we've got to go."

"What's the matter?" Onii-chan asked seriously, noticing that Masaki-san was packing up his bag.

"We're going to have lunch on the train."

"What are you talking about?" Yuki asked.

"A road trip." Masaki-san smiled.

Meanwhile, Madoi stood alone in the mountains crying.

"Sniff..."

The tears flowed endlessly because the loneliness wouldn't go away.

Everything changes, no matter how much you wish otherwise.

The snow was bright, reflecting the light of the moon.

Not a soul heard him cry.

With the powers of Sakashima restored, Madoi was now the Tochigami of this land.

But what about it? Nobody really needed his powers to get on with their lives.

Religious people lessened each year. The rituals he knew did not hold much meaning anymore.

His promise of a hundred years had been fulfilled, but what then? Madoi didn't know what he was supposed to do from now on.

"Nene-sama, Nene-sama..." he whispered into his sleeve.

His kimono sleeve was heavy with his tears. But still, Madoi walked on with steady feet.

It had become his daily routine to walk to the ritual platform.

The shrilling sound of bells rang out, familiar to his ears now.

He had no purpose visiting the borders any longer, but then, he had nowhere else to go.

He walked downhill along his usual path.

Arriving at his destination, he stepped up on to the stone.

He stared at the thick, white wall before him. How he wished he could go to the other side...

"I thought we were going to freeze to death waiting!" Sanae shouted.

"Huh...?" Madoi blinked.

"We were prepared to wait overnight though," Sanae added.

"You're still crying? Come on, man up!" Kouhei barked.

"He's still a child. He's allowed to cry as much as he wants," Yuki said calmly.

"Just in case you're wondering, I'm on Touyama's side this time." Masaki-san chimed.

I swooped Madoi up into my arms.

"Um... um...?" Madoi stammered.

"What's wrong? Eh... Eh..."

"Huh?"

"Achoo!!!"

I, Mizuho Touyama, sneezed in Madoi's face. Everyone watched in horror as a large booger slid down his cheek.

"I'm so sorry!!" I cried, wiping Madoi's face with a tissue from my bag.

"Ow, ow, you're scrubbing too hard!" he complained.

"I'm so sorry I was late in coming too!" I laughed, still wiping.

"Mizuho Nene-sama... is that really you?" he asked, voice trembling.

"Mizuho Nene-sama? It is really me," I said, mimicking his tone.

"You don't make a very good mimic," he chuckled.

"At least you're smiling now."

"But, how did you get here?" he asked.

"From the other side of Sakashima of course. We came from the next prefecture."

"B-but, the wall..." Madoi pointed shakily.

"It's job is to keep Tagami and Sakashima apart, right? But the other boundaries dividing Sakashima and someplace else wouldn't care about us Tagami people at all."

"Oh."

Masaki-san had done his research and knew how some rules only applied to certain people. If we couldn't enter Sakashima because the wall was reacting to us now, we just needed to enter from someplace else that had nothing to do with us at all.

"We are free people." Masaki-san declared, satisfied.

Madoi hugged me fiercely. He fit so comfortably in my arms, I never wanted to let go.

"You're so cold," I murmured.

"Because I was alone," he said.

"Well you won't go cold anymore. I'll see to that."

"That means..."

"I'm keeping you by my side."

"Mizuho nene-sama..."

"Wait," I lightly slapped him on the forehead before he could cry.

"Let's go."

"W-where?"

"Back home, of course."

"B-but, I can't. There's the wall. Maybe next new year..."

"Oi, god! Do your job!" I yelled into my cellphone.

The connection was bad.

Soon after, the wall turned translucent.

"Aren't you a bossy one!" Shiro-sama grinned, holding a cellphone in her hand.

"Thank you technology!" I hooted.

"We'll go first." As they said that, Onii-chan, Sanae, Yuki, and lastly Masaki-san stepped across the border.

They all belonged to Tagami, so they had no problem going back.

I was sure I could step over without any problem too.

"But Madoi is the god of Sakashima now," he said. "Madoi can't cross."

"But you were in Tagami until recently."

"That's because at that time Madoi hadn't regained his powers..."

"Then why don't you give them away?" I pointed at Shiro-sama. "You didn't want the powers, right? You gave up searching for it, why not just give up being a god altogether?"

Madoi looked speechless, his mouth wide open.

"Shiro-sama's taken your father's powers away before. She can do it again."

"B-but, isn't it wrong to pass our powers around like that?"

"I told you, the freedom of man is astounding." Shiro-sama smiled at Madoi. "To us it's an impossible thought, but for humans, it seems they just think 'why not?' and allow it."

"Um... uh..."

"Uh, don't tell me you've changed your mind?" I asked.

If that was the case, then I had just been an idiot.

"Mizuho nene-sama, we're going to be together?" he asked softly.

"I know I've disappointed you in the past, but this time I'm going to do better... I think."

"You sound so unsure of yourself!" Madoi giggled.

But it was an easy laugh, one that told me he trusted me completely.

"Let's go." I stretched my hand out to him, and he took it in his tiny hands.



"What happens if Madoi goes weak again?" he asked.

"We could return back here for a little while, or ask Shiro-sama to give back your powers temporarily."

"To think you would make us throw around our powers like a hackey sack... Mizuho, you owe me big time," Shiro-sama said.

"I told you before, you can have Masaki-san anytime in return for your help."

"What!! Masaki! You agreed to something like that!?" Yuki yelled.

"I didn't!" Masaki pleaded "I didn't, it's not my idea so please put away your naginata-Aaaaaaaagh!"

"You think you'll have more fun on the other side?" I asked.

"Madoi feels bad for Masaki-san to admit this, but yes!" he said.

We both took a step forward, together.

There was a thin, partly translucent wall glowing before us, still faintly marking the border between Tagami and Sakashima. But...

"Welcome home, Madoi," I said.

"I'm back, Nene-sama."

We both stepped over the boundary together.

Everybody was waiting for us there.

Appendix

Tochigami: A god that rules a certain part of land. Tochi means land, gami means god.

Hamaya: A good luck charm in the shape of an arrow. In kanji it is spelt "Destruct Demon Arrow".

Sanganichi: The first three days of the Japanese New Year

Saisenbako: A box placed before an alter in a shrine to receive offerings of money.

Hatsumode: First visit to a shrine/temple in the beginning of the year. People often go to pray for a good year ahead.

Comiket: Derived from the term "comic market", it is a major Otacon event held twice a year in Japan.

Yashiro: A Shinto shrine. Sizes vary from large buildings to small structures that only hold a statue.

Shiromaru: Shiro's faithful wolf companion. Originally named "Shirou" in the visual novel, I changed it for clarity.

Kotatsu: A table with a heater installed underneath so people can warm their legs, often with a blanket over it to keep in the heat.

Naginata: A Japanese polearm with a curved blade, used by samurai, warrior monks, and notably onna-musha (female warriors).